In Virginia, a community battles Wegmans
In Texas, residents oppose a solar farm

The Case for Government by Neighbor
What would it take for people to trust politicians again?

BY DAVID FONTANA
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A Crisis of Power and Place
Our country’s path to political influence involves defecting from your hometown to a wealthy Zip code. It’s undermining trust — and corroding democracy.

The Battle for Brown Grove
A small African American community tries to block a new Wegmans warehouse.

Opening Lines
Green vs. green in a fight over a solar farm.

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Note to readers: The magazine is taking a break. There will be no Aug. 15 issue. Find the crossword in the Aug. 15 Arts & Style section. We’ll return Aug. 22.
Opponents of a solar farm worry about its potential environmental impact

BY MARY BETH GAHAN

Cynthia Martin leaned against a folding table and addressed the 20 people in front of her. She projected her voice so her words wouldn’t be lost in the whirring of the two floor fans set up in the local community center. “This week, I’m gonna pull that one last magic rabbit out of the hat,” she said.

She was speaking to a neighborhood group of mostly ranchers, farmers and retirees who meet once a week in Dike, Tex., an unincorporated community two hours east of Dallas with a population of about 1,000. The area is largely undeveloped and is part of the Post Oak Savannah, an “ecoregion” of 8.5 million acres that runs along East Texas from the Red River to south of Houston. The land that hasn’t been cleared and converted to Bermuda grass for cattle grazing is covered in dense forest, or native grasses like little bluestem.

There are few areas of old-growth post oak trees left in Texas. They’re snapshots of what this region used to look like when bison, black bears and wild turkeys roamed. In addition to clearing, fire suppression has reduced the number of towering hardwoods that have been there for hundreds of years. Without heat to knock out invasive species, undergrowth has sprouted up around the trees, and shorter mesquite trees have taken over the landscape.

Under the canopies of the post oaks, wildlife like bald eagles and white-tailed deer take cover. In fields where milkweed grows, monarch butterflies lay their eggs. The potential loss of part of that wildlife habitat is what prompted the group to first gather under a tent in March. More than 100 people attended that meeting. After that, they pooled their resources to make it a concerted effort. One resident sent mailers monthly to everyone on the local postal route. Another took drone photos of the area. They formed a Facebook group to get information out quickly.

And Martin hired a law firm.

Their was a battle of green vs. green. A French energy company called Engie, with an annual revenue of $70 billion in 2019, is in the process of leasing acreage from landowners in Dike with the intent of installing solar panels on the ground. The company has already secured contracts to use 1,850 acres. Those who sign on will receive $500 per acre annually. Residents who are against the project worry it could have unintended environmental impacts, such as increased runoff to nearby parcels of land, and the release of carbon gases stored in the trees that would need to be cleared to make way for the panels.

That’s what Martin argued in the lawsuit she filed against Engie the day after the meeting on June 28 — the magic trick she’d promised the group. According to a study that Martin commissioned with $5,000 of her own money by Austin-based water planning and engineering firm Aqua Strategies, Engie’s plan could have serious consequences. If it goes ahead, creeks that snake between the trees could rise, and runoff to parts of her 283-acre property could increase by 43 percent. The court denied Martin’s request for a temporary restraining order to halt the construction, but she is still seeking damages of $250,000 from the company.

Engie completed environmental studies of its own, company spokesman Kevin Phelan told me via email, and came back with “no findings of concern.” (He answered questions about Engie’s plans, but would not comment on the pending litigation.)

Martin says she was wooed by Engie earlier this year in hopes that she would lease her land for the project. She says she asked about potential logging, as her property is heavily wooded and some of the trees are more than 100 years old.

One acre of post oak trees stores about 313 tons of carbon dioxide, according to Fred Raley, tree development coordinator at Texas A&M Forest Service. When trees are cleared, the gases are released back into the air. Phelan told me the company would log no more than 100 acres, not including Martin’s property.

The company’s final proposal to Martin included a $25,000 signing bonus. She turned it down. “It’s certainly not a policy of our firm to stand in the way of alternative energy, but you can’t just be free rein, where you go in and overturn the land that is already in place,” says Chris Bell, Martin’s lawyer.

There’s no question that Texas has an energy problem: February’s deadly winter storm paralyzed the grid and left millions without power. Two weeks before the community center meeting this summer, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, the electric grid operator in the state, asked Texans to turn up their thermostats to reduce the load on the system. A lack of wind in West Texas slowed the turbines there; other power plants went offline for...
unknown reasons. The one thing that “kept the lights on” during that time, says Daniel Cohan, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at Rice University, was solar energy.

Since December 2018, Engie has held two town hall meetings with residents. The company recently sent an information packet to everyone whose property is adjacent to the proposed project. In it, the company says the facility will create as many as 400 short-term construction jobs and four permanent positions, and will generate enough electricity in the first year to power more than 78,000 homes.

But that’s not enough to convince some in the area. “Everybody around here already has a job, so who is that paying? It’s paying people outside of our community and giving them more money,” Dike resident Michele Barnes told me. “We’re not getting anything, and they’re taking everything away from us. It’s basically going to ruin Dike.”

The group has another trick up its sleeve if the lawsuit doesn’t work. Members have compiled enough signatures in support of incorporating Dike as a city. To start the process, they’d need to hire a surveyor, which would cost $12,000. The group has $3,000 saved and plans to hold a cookout to raise more money. If the vote goes their way, the residents hope to annex land that has been leased for the solar facility. “We’re just going to tax them out,” Barnes says.

Dike resident Ronny Joslin’s 18-year-old daughter Riley has Down syndrome and is highly sensitive to sound. She sleeps with earmuffs to block noise. The Joslins’ property is on the north end of the proposed solar facility; panels would be installed about 200 feet from their house, and an inverter, which converts the electricity, would be 900 feet from the home, according to Engie.

“We are well aware of the needs of the Joslin family and have been in contact with them on several occasions,” Phelan wrote in an email.

One Dike resident told Joslin that he believed people could do whatever they want with their land. Now, says Joslin of his neighbor, “Me and him don’t even wave when we pass on this county road out here.”

Mary Beth Gahan is a writer in Dallas.
“I feel like the only way to get justice and change now is through economic empowerment.”

Percy Miller

INTERVIEW BY ERIC EASTER
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN FRAMEZ

After selling millions of records on his own independent label, No Limit Records, rapper and music mogul Percy Miller (a.k.a. Master P), 54, is now the chief executive of P. Miller Enterprises, which has launched a popular line of grocery products. He lives in Los Angeles.

Through No Limit Records you were already legendary for your hustle in the music business, but you’re starting these small brands and have become something of a guru of small-business ownership. Why the shift?

I let people know that I come from hip-hop, but that was one part of my life. I view that like my childhood. This is new. I feel like the only way to get justice and change now is through economic empowerment, and the more African Americans and Latinos that we educate and show the importance of entrepreneurship, this will be the only way we eliminate poverty and a lack of education.

I don’t want to pigeonhole you as just a “celebrity,” but plenty of celebrities have used their platform to promote the concept of wealth-building in the Black community. You seem to be taking a very specific approach with creating consumer products, however.

Well, when you look at the big picture, product outweighs talent. Look at Michael Jordan. Where does he make most of his money for real now? Through product. George Foreman? Through product. These guys were super-talented, but those careers just sparked their business. Look at “Famous Amos.” [Wally Amos] was on the right track with his product, but he sold for a couple of million dollars. They sold that brand later for $1.4 billion. His family should be eating off that right now.

I’m talking about building generational wealth. It starts with product, and we have so many great entrepreneurs in our culture who never get a chance to take their products and pass that down.

What most intrigues me about your products is that they are basic household staples, the things our mothers made us run to the corner store to get — not the fancy tequilas, vodkas, fashion lines, the things that other stars are associated with. Everyday stuff.

I grew up buying and eating these products, the snack foods, and none of us ever owned them. People make billions of dollars off of us. We spend a trillion dollars a year, and we never own the simple things: the chips, the cereal, ice cream, noodles, rice, pancake mix, syrup. You look at Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben — these are pure mockeries of us. Our grandparents made us buy these products because we thought it was Black-owned.

I want to change that narrative and show people that I built something from the ground up and built a successful brand. I know that’s not sexy. It’s not the music business.

How important is it to have your face and name on the box?

It’s a bit of karma that your Uncle P products are showing up on shelves with your image, just at the same time Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben are being cast out.

That was so important. I’m somebody you know, who you can relate to. A family member. I’m proud to say my picture is on the product and we’re giving back to the community. I’m not afraid to say: This is us, created by us. Real people.

I ran into a caterer recently, and her dream was to send you a dessert and get you to review it on your Master P Reviews YouTube channel. How many products are you getting in?

I get so many from all around the world, from all kinds of people. I tell people, “No idea is a whack idea,” and just giving that shine to small-business people who look like us has opened up so many doors. That’s my purpose. I never lived a perfect life, but I’ve figured out what my purpose is.
Who wants to talk shop for a half-hour?

I’m actually really terrible at dating,” confessed Jeanie Gordon, 32. “I go out on a date and [I’m] like, ‘You seem like a nice person, but I have no interest in engaging any further.’ Which probably says something about me personally that I should talk to somebody about,” she told me with a laugh.

The D.C. resident, who works in database management, is an avid recreational soccer player and has primarily dated men she’s met through the sport or through friends: “I like people who are athletic, but also nerdy and passionate about something that I don’t know about.” Though she has dating apps on her phone, she’s rarely on them because she feels “really weird about making a snap judgment on someone.”

Perhaps Maryland resident Joe Denicola, 27, will be the “nerdy” athlete she’s looking for. Joe, who works as a technical information specialist, enjoys training for and running marathons and took up weightlifting during the pandemic. Joe has never dipped his toe into online dating, and has met his previous girlfriends through activities and clubs. “Most started out as friends and then we started dating,” he recalled. He believes open communication is the key to a lasting relationship. “It’s easy to have good communication at the start, but it’s hard to maintain it,” he said. “People need to be able to express what they need.”

We set the duo up on a virtual date. Joe’s first impression when Jeanie came on the screen at 5 p.m.: “She had a very nice smile. That really caught me.” What caught Jeanie’s eye was the bookshelf in his background. “I’m a big reader. It’s very important to me that someone is at least vaguely interested in reading,” she said. However, she told me that when she asked Joe about his books, he replied, “I don’t really read” — which was a bit of a turnoff. “But to his credit, he did say he was trying to read more,” Jeanie said.

Both Jeanie and Joe had dinner delivered, but neither ate during the date. Jeanie prefers to eat later in the day, and Joe said, “We just kept talking.”

Joe appreciated commiserating with Jeanie about the fact that they both started new jobs during the pandemic. “You don’t see your co-workers in person and you don’t meet everyone on your first day,” he explained. However, Jeanie was not a fan of talking shop. “I personally don’t want to talk about work for half an hour when you are on a first date,” she said. “If I’m talking about work for a half-hour, I’m usually networking.” Jeanie also felt pressure to lead the discussion: “I’m usually not the person who directs conversation, so that felt kind of odd.”
She was more curious about what he did outside of work and steered the conversation to one of her passions: Olympic weightlifting. “No, I’m not training for the Olympics,” she explained. “It sounds really cool and intense, but it’s just a subgenre of weightlifting.” Joe thought it was “awesome” that they had a similar interest. “It’s very impressive to me that she’s getting trained at a gym for Olympic weightlifting. I was definitely able to relate to her journey.”

Joe shared the story of how he sprained his ankle seven miles into his first marathon and kept going until he finished, which Jeanie didn’t think was the safest thing to do. “That seems like that’s a ‘stop and don’t hurt yourself’ moment — but I’m also of the age when I hurt myself I’m down for the count for a long time,” she told me.

When the topic of the furry loves in their lives came up, Jeanie was intrigued that Joe has an Instagram for his three-legged cat named Tripoli. “Three-legged cats are adorable,” she said. Joe was happy to meet Alfie, Jeanie’s dog: “She physically brought him up to the screen — he’s a cutie.”

By 6:30 p.m., Jeanie said she was ready to wrap things up since her home office was getting quite warm and Alfie, who usually gets walked at 5 p.m., was staring at her demanding to go out. Joe asked for Jeanie’s number just before they logged off.

**RATE THE DATE**

**Joe:** 4 [out of 5]. “It was fun getting to know her. She had a lot of cool stuff to say about her job, weightlifting and pets. It just went pretty smoothly.”

**Jeanie:** 2. “He seemed like a fine human being. … It felt very trying to me. It was an effort to stay engaged.”

**UPDATE**

Joe texted her the next day to see if she could meet for an in-person date before he left for a trip. “I told him I couldn’t go before he left for his trip,” said Jeanie. “I’m kind of hoping to just leave it at that.” Joe said he asked if she’d like to meet at a later time — but he never heard back.

Vijai Nathan is a writer and comedian in Washington.

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Vijai Nathan is a writer and comedian in Washington.
America’s Hidden Crisis of Power and Place

Our country’s path to political influence involves defecting from your hometown and congregating in one of a handful of wealthy Zip codes. It’s undermining trust in government — and corroding our democracy.

STORY BY DAVID FONTANA  ILLUSTRATION BY NOMA BAR
I do not remember the year, but I remember the moment. It was a beautiful summer afternoon in Plattsburgh, the small town where I was raised in the North Country in far Upstate New York. Every year the dark winters gave way to a bright summer defined by Lake Champlain on one side of the town and the Adirondack Mountains on the other. The summers were anchored by a singular event, the Mayor's Cup Regatta and Festival, which drew spectators from all over the region to celebrate the boats sailing on Lake Champlain.

My family had just finished our fun at the neighborhood beach watching the boats when we went shopping at the Grand Union supermarket. We entered the checkout aisle, and there, right in front of me, I met a celebrity equal in my mind at the time to Michael Jordan and Michael J. Fox together: the mayor of Plattsburgh. Mayor Carlton Rennell. My father thanked him for promoting the Mayor's Cup along with the socialist mayor across Lake Champlain (a young Bernie Sanders). My mother talked to him about being a former teacher and thanked him for being good to unions.

My trip to the supermarket was more than 30 years ago and a few hundred miles from my home now in D.C. It was a moment that was completely forgettable, and I have always wondered why I still remember it. I was raised by two social scientists who had pictures of political figures from all over the world in our house, but there was something different about actually meeting the political figure from across town. It may sound corny...
or at the very least extremely earnest, but this is the truth: I think this moment stayed with me because, even as a kid, I appreciated knowing that the person who made the Mayor’s Cup — and in turn made my summer — had to wait in the same Grand Union line that we did.

Rennell wasn’t the only politician like this in the North Country. Consider another local leader, Bill Owens, who in a 2009 special election became the first Democrat to represent some parts of the North Country in Congress since before the Civil War. In 2010 — the worst year for Democrats running for Congress in 72 years — he retained his seat and did so one more time in 2012. Owens grew up in Long Island but lived in the North Country for 30 years, raising three children there before eventually running for Congress.

Owens retired in 2014 to return to Plattsburgh, and he was succeeded by someone who has now risen to national prominence: Elise Stefanik. Before Stefanik replaced Rep. Liz Cheney in the House GOP leadership, becoming a national face of Trumpism, she was known locally as a political talent of the first order — but one who, in contrast to her predecessor, had built her career outside the area. Though she was raised just south of the congressional district in Albany, she made her name as an adult in some of the most politically powerful metropolitan areas in the country: in Boston and Washington, places that were a world apart from the Grand Union in Plattsburgh.

The North Country is more rural, and less diverse, than much of the United States. But it is emblematic of one of the most disconcerting, least-discussed aspects of our national political life: America is experiencing a political crisis rooted partly in the concept of place. Our political elite in both parties are disproportionately connected to a few neighborhoods in a few metropolitan areas that are distant and different from the places they are supposed to understand and govern. For too many of these people, the road to political influence involves effectively defec ting from the places they know to the places where there are people it is important to know. That leaves many places in our country governed by strangers rather than neighbors — with disastrous consequences for American democracy.

W e are and always have been a country defined — and divided — by place. James Madison wrote more than 200 years ago in the Federalist Papers that the United States would be a “large ... republic” composed of political communities sorted by geography.

For a long time, place shaped people’s lives in part because it was so hard to get anyone or anything to other places. Madison gave a speech during the first Congress worrying that political leaders would need “liberal compensations” to incentivize them to travel great distances. When the capital of the young country moved to Washington, and Congress met for the first time there in 1800, members endured difficult travel conditions. The roads were so bad at the time that, as Fergus M. Bordewich recounts in “Washington: The Making of the American Capital,” “it was customary for drivers to call to their passengers to act as ballast by first leaning to one side and then to the other, to keep the coach from overturning.” The mail situation wasn’t much better: In some parts of the country, deliveries or collections could be spaced a week apart.

Advances in technology and transportation have obviously changed these dynamics, expanding the number of weak ties that people can have over long distances. But place still matters a lot — more than you might think — in defining who many Americans are. In the average county weighted by population, according to a study from the Journal of Economic Perspectives, 55 percent of Facebook friends live within 50 miles of one another, even though only 1 percent of people live within 50 miles of one another. Childhood is defined by being in the places that your family chooses for you, and after high school you can finally pick your own place to live — yet one analysis found that students on average opt to attend a college less than 15 miles from their childhood home. Another study found that the median distance that adults live from their mother is 18 miles.

Robin Dunbar — an evolutionary psychologist at Oxford best known for the “Dunbar number,” his finding that the number of friends people can have has remained remarkably consistent across history and societies — has shown that the key to closer relationships remains shared in-person experiences. Charles Hunt at Boise State University and I have started to study these issues nationally, but we began with a survey of undergraduates at Boise State. Even though they are a much more mobile group than the general U.S. population, 58 percent believe that “most of the people who are most important to me live close to where I live.”

The power of place persists in politics as well. Yes, people are heavily influenced by political and media figures they do not know — from cable pundits to Donald Trump. But people’s political engagement is shaped in important ways by those they know. Many studies have demonstrated that hearing our neighbors have voted or want us to vote increases the likelihood that we will turn out to vote. In the survey Hunt and I conducted, 69 percent of students reported that most of the people they talked to most frequently about politics live close to them.

S ince places are their own communities with their own self-reinforcing worldviews, it stands to reason that, in our democracy, the people who represent those places should genuinely understand them. A democracy that allocates power by place is, or is supposed to be, an intimate democracy. Not all democracies are set up this way — countries like Israel and the Netherlands allocate power through national systems of proportional representation — but in the United States, our political leaders are meant to govern people with whom they share a lived experience anchored in a place.

The need for political elites to be connected to the places they rule is different from the need for other elites to be connected to the places they influence. Plattsburgh is in the middle of the American economic spectrum, but a phrase I heard a lot there as a child was that if you really wanted to make it to the top, you had to “get out.” Many of the most talented residents left to work in places like Boston or Houston. This was celebrated rather than scorned — and for good reason: Plattsburgh expatriates can still make great products for those in Plattsburgh even if they are living elsewhere.

Democracy, at least here in the United States, is different. Congress is the most obvious example of place-based democracy in practice, but presidents are elected by the electoral college, which is a place-based institution (although unfortunately some of these places are given far more power than others because of geographical discrimination). Federal officials across the executive branch — from the Department of Justice to the Environmental Protection Agency — are divided into regions and sometimes located in those disparate places.

These rules are decades or centuries old, and yet the desire for government by neighbor is still broadly and deeply felt. As part of his forthcoming book, Charles Hunt explored how connected
candidates for the U.S. House were to their districts. He looked at factors like where they attended high school and college and their professional experiences in the district. Candidates with substantial connections to their district outperformed expectations by as many as 9 percentage points — a difficult feat during a time when party is thought to predict so many votes. Hunt believes this is likely happening because these candidates turned out more voters from their own party and attracted more voters from the opposing party.

There is probably no better example of these preferences than what happened in the Bronx and Queens in 2018. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s upset victory over incumbent Joseph Crowley in a Democratic House primary is now remembered as a story about ideology — left-wing voters revolting against a moderate congressman. And of course that was part of it. But it was also a story about place. Ocasio-Cortez was a bartender who was born in the Bronx and returned there after college. When she launched her campaign, she alleged that Crowley had lost touch with his district: Someone who “doesn’t send his kids to our schools, doesn’t drink our water or breathe our air,” she said, “cannot possibly represent us.”

Most Americans still realize how much their place shapes their lives and choices. However, for the most privileged Americans, the power of place, while very real, has become harder to see — because their places change more significantly and more frequently.

Those with professional or graduate degrees are nearly three times as likely as those without a high school degree to move across state lines in a given year, according to the American Community Survey and demographer Lyman Stone. These numbers are even more dramatic among the highest-status educational institutions: As of 2015, 85 percent of Harvard first-year students moved from outside Massachusetts. And those Americans more willing and able to move toward opportunity tend to concentrate in the most privileged neighborhoods in the most privileged metropolitan areas. In 2019, 9 percent of Washington’s population moved from outside D.C. The comparison here is admittedly imperfect, but in the congressional district where I’m from in the North Country, 3 percent of the population moved in from a different state or country.

The energy of places like Washington is part of what makes them so attractive, and that energy exists because there are more new people from new places saying new things. If people are always coming and going, though, it can be harder to remember that they share the same place now. Many studies have found that people who live in the same place for longer have more of an attachment to their communities, and, for some of them, that is why they stayed there in the first place. Being more connected to the larger world, by contrast, can mean being less connected to your immediate world.

In the study about Facebook, just 27 percent of Facebook friends of people living in San Francisco County were within 50 miles of one another — roughly half the percentage for America as a whole. When I am interviewed by reporters in the North Country, they care that I am from Plattsburgh. No Washington reporter has ever asked me if I am from Washington.

Place matters even in the most mobile of neighborhoods. The preschool and playground in our D.C. neighborhood — where we have seen the same people every day for years — remind us how lucky we are to live in this place. Still, when so many other people around you are changing frequently, it is difficult to remember just how much influence place exercises in all of our lives.

The divergence between two groups — a narrower slice of the most privileged people who are more defined by their moving, and those Americans who are more defined by their staying — is even more dramatic among our most powerful political figures. The most important political elites have strong reasons to move and few places to move to. There are great opportunities to invest money or conduct medical research in many places. But there are just a few places that have the greatest political opportunities.

The factors pulling political elites toward just a few neighborhoods — which are much whiter and wealthier than the rest of America, among other differences — are strong. One could choose innumerable examples, but take two political biographies that are representative of how the path to power has worked in recent decades.

Paul Ryan was elected to Congress in 1998 from Janesville, Wis., current population about 64,000. Ryan attended college outside Wisconsin. He then moved to Washington, where he would work as an aide to one senator and a legislative director to another. He also worked for influential Republican Jack Kemp — learning things and building relationships far from Janesville that he later described as important in his career.

In 2017, Jon Ossoff ran in a special election in Georgia to fill an empty seat in the House of Representatives. Ossoff was raised in an area close to the district in which he was seeking office, but went to Georgetown University and attended graduate school in London. He had not lived in the area for some time and did not live in the district when he was running for office — so he could not even vote for himself. Ossoff touted his experience as a “national security aide” in Washington during the campaign. He lost that election, but in 2020 ran for the Senate — and won.

Ryan and Ossoff do not share the same ideology, but they do have one thing in common: Like so many of their colleagues, their path to power ran through places other than the ones they were from. It is telling that only about half of new members of Congress in 2021, according to Forbes, had a degree from a college or university in their state.

The need to raise money, it should go without saying, is a huge reason aspiring politicians must form deep connections outside their districts. In the last House election in the North Country, the candidates raised $20 million — with the Washington and New
York metropolitan areas contributing more than the North Country itself. One study in the journal Political Behavior found that in the 2005-06 congressional election cycle, about 5 percent of America’s Zip codes — concentrated in a few neighborhoods in a few metropolitan areas — were responsible for 77 percent of all individual contributions to congressional campaigns. And Anne Baker at Santa Clara University found that, from 2006 to 2012, the “average member of the House received just 11 percent of all campaign funds from donors inside the district.” The trend in this direction has been dramatic. In 1990, according to a study in Political Research Quarterly, out-of-district donors accounted for 42 percent of individual contributions to the median incumbent in the U.S. House. By 2010, that number was 72 percent. And candidates from both parties have a similar geographic distribution in their fundraising: Republicans also raise lots of money from New York City, and Democrats also raise lots of money from Houston.

Every two years I receive emails from North Country friends from both political parties telling me they are visiting D.C. to raise money and need a place to crash. (I was approached about running for Congress in the North Country years ago, but quickly decided it wasn’t for me.) I have heard this experience described the same way by many of these people: They call it the all-important “Washington Trip.”

Not surprisingly, money raised from other places changes the way politicians vote. In a new paper, Brandice Canes-Wrone of Princeton University and Kenneth Miller of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas find that, in almost one-third of the votes in the House of Representatives from 2005 to 2017, there was a difference between what constituents desired and what national donors demanded. More than 80 percent of the time, the representative sided with their national donors and not their constituents. And this wasn’t just about heeding the will of highly partisan donors — because there was often still a divide between what the partisans within a district wanted and what the partisan national donors wanted. When the partisans within the district wanted something different than the distant donors, 66 percent of the time the representative voted with the national donors.

The donors whom elected officials are listening to are also products of places — but other places. These donors have attitudes shaped by what their neighbors think just like other people do. And donor neighborhoods are quite unlike the rest of America on many important policy issues, such as how to manage social welfare spending or whether and how to increase taxes.

But this phenomenon isn’t merely about politicians or the donors who influence them. Politicians with weak connections to their home districts or states can translate to staffers with weak (or no) connections to these places. Charles Hunt and I found that members of the House of Representatives more connected to their districts were about 40 percent more likely to have a chief of staff with prior employment experience in the state where the district is located. The leading producer of congressional staff is the school where I teach, George Washington University, in D.C. Beyond Congress, presidents nominate thousands of individuals to the executive branch — and a study by Anne Joseph O’Connell of Stanford Law School found that almost 30 percent of them are already in the Washington metropolitan area at the time they are nominated.

Outside of government, the story is much the same. The Post-Star, a newspaper in Glens Falls as powerful as any in the North Country, has only about one-fifth the number of newsroom employees as it did 10 years ago. Meanwhile, according to the Pew Research Center, more than 20 percent of newsroom positions are in New York, Washington or Los Angeles.

It is important to note, by the way, that the influence of political movers transcends the usual categories of urban and rural. The most politically powerful places are just a handful of neighborhoods in just a handful of superstar metropolitan areas. Baltimore and Phoenix are major metropolitan areas, but they are relatively minor political players. Rural America is overrepresented politically in many ways — but even rural America is often governed by leaders from distant and different places.

The upshot of all of these developments is that political power today often involves choices between political movers rather than between movers and more locally rooted leaders. There are business leaders and doctors and lawyers in the North Country; many of these figures could make great candidates for office. These people rarely get a realistic chance to run, though, because they are not the type of people who can raise millions of dollars or who can arrange to be interviewed on CNN or Fox News, which is what people increasingly must do to rise to power. It’s notable that one of Stefanik’s challengers for 2022, Democrat Matt Putorti, grew up in the district but has lived in New York City in recent years. He registered to vote in the district two weeks before announcing his candidacy.

Our political elites were always going to be political movers to some degree, and that is both understandable and necessary. Seeing the country and the world makes for better political elites. The diversity of people and perspectives that are available from living in different places simply cannot be achieved by staying put — particularly if staying put means staying in a place that is not very diverse. If everyone in a place stays put then everything in the place will stay still, yet the world changes, and every place needs to change with it. Moreover, modern government is technocratic, and technocrats can more easily be created if large numbers of talented people are living next to and learning from one another. Every industry is dominated by people who have to leave their homes to learn how to be the best in their industry.

The problem is that, to benefit from
places with great privileges, people do not just connect to their new places; they also disconnect from their old places. New colleagues replace old colleagues. New friends replace old friends. Couples meet and are married in these privileged places, and children are born and raised there. The result is partially a national elite that understands what the entire country needs, but it is also an elite that mostly understands the privileged places that helped them come to power in the first place — and, even worse, that has been blinded to the significance of place as a political issue altogether.

There is an entire infrastructure that reflects — and then reinforces — the sense that place matters much less than it really does. Polling firms that produce results dominating our political system ask questions that matter enormously everywhere rather than those that only matter somewhere. They ask how people compare Joe Biden to Donald Trump, or what they want done about immigration, rather than what should be done about a locally significant employer that is departing.

Political elites campaigning for office internalize this lesson over their careers and speak the language of a post-place politics. They talk about red or blue and Trump or Biden. For their part, political editors at major outlets send reporters from far away to cover wide swaths of the country because they do not have reporters living there — and those reporters are more likely to cover these places through a national lens.

The disconnect of political elites from the places they represent is particularly concerning for America's most politically powerless groups. These groups have a hard time being understood even across the room. Being understood from across town — or across the country — can be an impossible task. Political elites deciding what these groups want or need may be more likely to stereotype them in even more problematic ways than other distant groups.

Consider the recent mayoral primaries in New York City. The Zip code that contributed the most was 77 percent White and, adjusted for population, gave about $80 to candidates for every dollar contributed by the Zip code that is most heavily African American (which is 93 percent African American). All voters in the city might have had their ballots counted the same, but it is hard to argue that all places in the city will be equally represented.

Another consequence of a post-place politics is an extreme deficit of trust. In 1958, the American National Election Study found that three-quarters of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing almost always or most of the time. Now a similar question finds that only one-quarter of Americans trust the federal government that way.

And yet, in an America plagued by pervasive distrust, it is notable how much people still trust those who are not geographically removed from them — people who share the good things and the bad things in life but, most important, the same things. My study with Charles Hunt found that about two times as many students agreed in some way rather than disagreed in some way with the statement that “the people who live closer to me understand me better than the people who live farther away from me.” We also found that five times as many students thought that parts of the government closer to them understand them better than parts of the government farther from them.

More than 70 percent of Americans, according to Pew, believe that local journalists report the news accurately — and they think this because local journalists are more connected to their communities. This at the same time as many Americans are physically threatening national media at political rallies.

It is much more difficult to mistrust or detest your congressional representative — even if you disagree with them on matters of substance — if you regularly see them at your child’s soccer games. In other words, the closer the ties between politicians and those they represent, the better the odds of rebuilding the baseline trust that is the glue of democracy.

To take just one example: Rep. Donald Payne Jr. — born and raised in Newark, which he now represents — was once asked why industrial pollution in his neighborhood upset him so much. In response, he talked about how it “is personal to me” because he was a lifelong resident of Newark and a parent of children living these experiences. He was saying something that too few politicians can truly say: that he was part of his community, not just that he knew about it.

It can be hard to understand how these personal connections work unless you have seen them in action. My mother has always proudly been on the political left. She has voted for a Republican only once: Janet Duprey, who was running for office in Clinton County in the North Country. My mom told me she knew the larger Duprey family well enough that she could trust Janet to do the right thing — and that she had talked to Janet about this. That kind of trust simply cannot be built through a politics divorced from place.

My family has traveled every summer for the past five years to the North Country. The beauty of the outdoors is what brought us back at first, but something else makes us return: It's knowing that every year we can talk to many of the same people doing many of the same things; it's wanting to travel somewhere that was once my home and that maintains a real sense of place.

Of course, Washington is our home now, and so we also love returning to our D.C. neighborhood and being reminded of the possibilities it provides. I always feel torn between where I was and what that place meant, and where I am and what that place offers.

The difference between places where people are stuck too long and places where people leave too soon is one of the central political cleavages of our time. Our governing elite should aspire to understand both. We should want more of them to be part-Washington and part-somewhere-else. We should want them to travel the world and meet the best people so they can learn. But we should also want them to settle somewhere in order to truly be among the people they govern. They can start off as movers and end up as stayers.

There are policy changes that can encourage this outcome. Alaska, for instance, has tried to limit how much money individuals from out of state can contribute to candidates running for office. And New York City, among other locales, gives residents a distinctive role in elections by matching their individual contributions to candidates with public contributions.

Money is only part of the problem, though, and rules are only part of the solution. The biggest change must involve not just altering the rules of politics but the rhetoric surrounding it. Place privilege in politics needs to be discussed and debated just like other forms of privilege. We should know the Zip codes that make our leaders who they are. And we should work toward a future when those Zip codes might include all the places that make up this large republic.

David Fontana is the Samuel Tyler Research Professor at George Washington University Law School.
THE BATTLE FOR BROWN GROVE

A small African American community tries to block a new Wegmans warehouse

STORY BY TYRESE COLEMAN WITH MELODY SCHREIBER  PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAHI CHIKWENDIU
he early December skies were foreboding as the protesters shivered in the chill outside a Wegmans grocery store. Still, they marched and held their signs high: “Wetlands over Wegmans,” “Not in my backyard,” “#Save Brown Grove!!!”

Among them were my cousins Renada Harris, 40, and Bonnica Cotman, 50. I’ve known them all my life, and I had never imagined them as activists, yet here the two sisters were, among the leaders of the group. In the past few months, I’d watched them go all-in trying to save our childhood home, Brown Grove, a historically Black community in Hanover County, Va., about 17 miles north of downtown Richmond. Brown Grove is facing, as they see it, the biggest existential threat of its 150-year history: the construction of a 1.1 million-square-foot, $175 million Wegmans distribution center.

Last summer, Renada and Bonnica watched as protesters marched through Richmond, demanding justice for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The statue of Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue was painted with graffiti, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy headquarters went up in flames. The city that was once the seat of the Confederate States of America proclaimed a new era. Now the sisters felt inspired to make their own calls for justice.
The group outside the Wegmans store had traveled from a “drive-in” — a sit-in that, because of the pandemic, took place in cars — about 18 miles away at the Brown Grove Baptist Church, the beating heart of the historic neighborhood. Protesters from adjacent communities came, too, including Chris French, an environmental consultant who has helped lead the fight. The group peaked at 75 or so people, the organizers recall, but they were heartened that anyone had braved the cold, covid and the lingering fear — held over from before the civil rights era by many Black residents — of speaking out against White people and the retaliation that could follow.

“A lot of people in the neighborhood, the older people, they still clean somebody’s house,” says Renada, a hairstylist and owner of a salon with her other sister, Kimberlyn Washington. “Things have not changed that much. They’ve kind of gotten stuck in that realm of better respect those White people.”

I moved from Brown Grove to Maryland 23 years ago, but as a writer, I wanted to follow along as the people I grew up with — Renada and Bonnica and other members of my extended family and former church — banded together with strangers from other neighborhoods to save, as they see it, their very way of life. I also wanted to understand Wegman’s side of the story and what benefits the company could bring to my childhood neighborhood.

Wegmans says it will add jobs and tax revenue to Hanover County; the folks gathered that day to protest believe the project could destroy Brown Grove. The activists note that the massive center would bring 24-hour floodlights and steady truck traffic to a site marked only by trees and swamps. The facility would sit on the unmarked graves of Brown Grove’s founders, they say, and it would disturb environmentally critical wetlands that help provide well water for many homes and serve as an ecosystem balance to nearby infrastructure like Interstate 95.

“I’m afraid that if we don’t put a stop to this, Brown Grove is not going to be a place that people who grew up here will want to come back to,” says Bonnica, a lifelong resident and a founding member of the Brown Grove Preservation Group, a collection of concerned individuals. “The community will die.”

Brown Grove, now home to a few hundred people, was founded around 1870. Many of its residents descended from Caroline Dobson Morris, an emancipated bondwoman known as “the mother of Brown Grove.” Morris, my great-great-great-grandmother, was born into slavery in 1846 in Hanover, a county where more than half of the population was enslaved. She died almost a century later, in 1944.

Morris and others were buried among the trees and hidden swamps of Brown Grove. The past hangs like curling vines over other local landmarks as well, like Merry Oaks Tavern, where Patrick Henry raised the first Virginia militia in anticipation of the Revolutionary War.

Brown Grove was a quiet place when my cousins and I were young. We would ride our bikes down the road to one another’s houses or to the store. If someone was walking down the street, they would wave, stop and say hello, ask how we were doing. But over the years, industrial expansion changed the way the community interacts.

In the late 1950s and early ‘60s, I-95 cut Brown Grove in two. An expansion of the highway from 2015 to 2017 further divided the community, even restricting one homeowner from access to his own driveway. A truck stop arrived when I-95 did; a municipal airport was built in 1969; two concrete plants soon sprang up; and a commercial landfill and recycling center for construction materials was built in 1987.

Renada, too young to protest then, watched her parents rallying to fight the landfill. But the project went forward anyway. Now trucks speed by, rumbling on the way to and from the landfill and the truck stop, and thick gray dust coats the yards and homes nearby. Airplanes buzz overhead, and some roads, which haven’t been improved over the years but have seen increased traffic, frequently flood.

The house I grew up in, the graveyard where my grandmother, great-grandmother, uncles, aunts and cousins are buried, and the homes of many family members all line a dirt road adjacent to the plot where Wegmans plans to build. My godmother can walk out of her back door and, within 100 feet, cross over the property line of the proposed center. During a visit last summer, I saw the signs of coming disruption: cones and orange markers, cleared ditches with long tubes, diggers and other heavy-duty machinery. All around Brown Grove and the surrounding neighborhoods, I saw yard signs with a Wegmans truck circled in red and crossed out with a slash.

Brown Grove residents say the community has long been neglected by county officials. Calls for road improvements have gone ignored. There are no sidewalks; the church has provided the only playground and public park; and some residents were only recently added to the county water system, while others still draw water from wells.

The fight for Brown Grove represents another social-justice challenge for Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam. He was besieged by scandal in 2019 after it was discovered that his medical-school yearbook page contained a photo of a man wearing blackface standing next to a person wearing Ku Klux Klan garb. After initially apologizing for the picture, Northam denied that they were of him, and an investigation into the matter was inconclusive. In response to claims of environmental racism in Virginia, the governor established an environmental justice council in January 2019 that makes recommendations, such as banning fossil fuel infrastructure. And Northam’s administration has worked to right some past wrongs, such as returning discarded gravestones from a demolished African American cemetery in D.C.

In a statement announcing the Wegmans project, Northam hailed it as a “significant win” that would bring hundreds of jobs to the county. Northam also approved a $2.35 million grant to pay for utility extensions, broadband installation, roadwork and other related project development costs.

Although Wegmans owns more than 100 supermarkets up and down the East Coast, this project would only be the company’s third distribution center. “We were surprised when we first heard that there was people opposed to this,” says David DeMascole, director of supply chain planning for Wegmans. But upon hearing the concerns, “We said, Okay, well, let’s understand what those concerns are, and what can we do to mitigate them or work with them.” Wegmans is a private, family-owned company, he notes. “The Wegmans family is not answering to shareholders or Wall
They decide how they want the company run, and then that’s what we do.’”

“We compete with big companies, right, like Walmart and Kroger and all of them, and compared to them, we’re small,” DeMascole says. “We’re going to do the right thing. It’s hard for other people outside to see that and believe it, but we’ll be good neighbors because that’s just what we do.” The new distribution center, he explains, would be the “single biggest investment we’ve ever made in the history of our company,” and that’s why they are being “meticulous.”

“We want to be good neighbors,” he emphasizes. “We’re not just saying that.” In response to community feedback, DeMascole says, Wegmans has made changes to the planned facility. It moved an employee entrance from opposite the Brown Grove Baptist Church to a few hundred feet down the road to alleviate traffic and prevent potential accidents, and it changed a truck route to keep vehicles away from a sharp turn on a road bordering an adjacent community; residents feared the road could become dangerous with increased traffic. The company also moved a planned parking lot for trucks away from bordering neighborhoods and will incorporate trees and shrubbery as a buffer between the facility and those houses. Passersby are “not even going to be able to see our warehouse,” DeMascole says, adding: “We think we’ve done things already to the site that weren’t required, and we’ll continue to look for opportunities where we can make a difference.”

But some residents of Brown Grove, several of whom will share a property line with the project, say Wegmans hasn’t done enough to consult the community directly. County and state officials announced the project at a meeting in February 2020 at a local school. The next day, the real estate agent representing Wegmans reached out to Brown Grove Baptist Church for a meeting with a handful of church leaders — providing, Bonnica says, only an hour and a half notice. (A representative for Wegmans confirmed the company’s participation in these and other meetings with neighbors, but “none of the meetings were called by or arranged by Wegmans,” she wrote in an email, “so we can’t speak to when notification of these meetings occurred.”) Wegmans never reached out to Brown Grove residents directly to hear what concerns the community might have, the activists say, and few of the questions they raised have been addressed.

Residents also question the benefits Wegmans would bring to the community. Wegmans won’t offer any specific contributions to Brown Grove, DeMascole says, beyond tax revenue to the county, jobs available to anyone in the region and a walking trail planned for the edge of the property. When asked if jobs were being set aside specifically for residents of nearby communities like Brown Grove, DeMascole says, “We haven’t set goals” on that, but “the expectation and strategy is that they will mostly be local.” There are also no plans to improve the community by creating sidewalks or playgrounds.

Renada is skeptical that the Wegmans project would be any different from when other companies have come along over these many years, which she says has only brought pollution and nuisance and no apparent benefits to the community. “The governor said that Wegmans is going to be good neighbors,” she argues, “but none of the other businesses that have been here for years have been good neighbors.” When it comes to industrial growth in Brown Grove, she says, “We don’t see the direct impact. We just see the businesses that come here and take.” Now, as she put it in a meeting with other organizers, “We’re learning how to fight for ourselves.”
On Saturday mornings, Chris French can be found bicycling through the forest or hiking in the swampy marshland near his home in a subdivision that borders Brown Grove. His interest in the Wegmans distribution center began at that February 2020 meeting. The county, the state and Wegmans made it sound as if the project was a “done deal,” he said later. But he had questions. He wondered why the county had asked Wegmans to apply to Virginia’s Department of Environmental Quality for a wetlands permit — as opposed to an industrial storm-water permit that would require Wegmans to examine downstream effects like potential pollution in the Chesapeake Bay. (Wegmans representatives said they have “satisfied” all permit requirements for county and federal agencies. DEQ declined to comment on a case currently under litigation.)

There were also errors in how the company calculated the wetlands that would be affected, French contends, with Wegmans initially claiming the project would disturb only six acres of wetlands and then revising to approximately 15 after a public outcry. French believes, based on his own analysis, that the project may affect up to 32 acres of critical wetlands. “These holes are so gaping, you can drive a Wegmans distribution center truck right through it,” he says. “Out of 22 years of experience, I have never seen anything like this before, where rules have been blatantly disregarded.”

In fact, French worked at the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality for more than four years as a water-quality planner. Now he’s facing off against the regulatory agency and his former co-workers — including the manager assigned to the Wegmans project who took him out to lunch his first day on the job, he says. “That’s not fun,” French says of being on the opposite side of old colleagues. But he believes he has an ethical obligation to make sure, when the stakes are this high, that everyone involved is following the rules. “I’m doing what’s right,” he says.

DeMascole says the site has been planned around the wetlands in order to minimize its effects. “We don’t need to use the whole property,” he says. When it came to the site design, “We moved it and tried to shape it to work around the contour of the land.” The property could have held a 2.1 million-square-foot facility, he points out, but the center is a little more than half that size — although there is room to expand it in the future, he acknowledges.

Beyond its environmental value, the wetlands are also the final resting place of Brown Grove’s ancestors. I grew up hearing about the graves, and elders in the community, like Charles Morris, who is in his 70s, say they still remember where they are.

It is illegal under Virginia law to disturb any cemetery, and Wegmans must preserve any human remains or historical artifacts found while excavating the area. The company hired experts to comb the official records and walk the property, looking for signs of burial grounds, DeMascole says. There is an active cemetery — the one where my grandmother and other family members are buried — near one side of the property. This cemetery is not on the proposed distribution center site, but unknown graves may exist beyond the boundaries of the graveyard. And Morris says there are older, unmarked graves on another side of the proposed site — across from the church, where the bulk of the facility would be built — that have not yet been found.

“We’ve hired consultants, archaeologists that have searched the site and searched all of the records, and they’ve found no documentation to say that there are graves there,” DeMascole says. “They have not found anything.” If additional graves are discovered, he says, Wegmans will follow all state procedures and protocols for the “remains to be dealt with in the appropriate manner.”

Brown Grove residents aren’t surprised that no documentation of centuries-old unmarked graves could be found in the official records. Its history, like that of many other African American communities, has been passed down in tradition and stories. Just because the graves cannot be located via county records or other research does not mean they don’t exist, residents say, or that the search for them should be over. They also wonder why the archaeology consultant did a walk-through of the property to
and then say her piece during the virtual public comment period. She had barely slept the night before, her nerves were coiled so tightly. Renada spoke to the board around 4 p.m., and the meeting went into the evening. Around 7, one of the board members announced they would cut short the public comments in order to hold a vote to approve or deny the permit for building on wetlands. The board voted: four in favor, three against. The permit passed, but with a much narrower margin than any of the activists had expected.

French, for one, was optimistic. “We got three people on our side,” he says. “If this decision was to be challenged, if it was to go legal somehow, a judge is going to pay attention to the fact that it’s that close.”

A month and a half later, exactly such a legal challenge was announced. Patricia Hunter-Jordan, president of the local NAACP chapter, stood on a podium in front of the stained-glass windows of Brown Grove Baptist Church and announced that the Hanover County NAACP, Protect Hanover and residents of nearby communities would file a lawsuit against the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, Wegmans and Air Park Associates, the current property owners. The lawsuit alleged that the parties did not meet environmental justice requirements for engaging the community or considering alternative sites, and submitted erroneous information on the wetlands. “Let’s get into some good trouble,” Hunter-Jordan said, quoting the late Rep. John Lewis, over the noise of passing trucks.

A separate lawsuit was filed by several residents who live close to the property against the Hanover County Board of Supervisors. The suit alleged that the board improperly amended land-use commitments previously made by the property owner to allow the project to move forward. Though the complaint was dismissed in November 2020 for lack of standing, it was later amended. A decision on whether the case can move forward has yet to be made.

Brown Grove protesters are hoping that another environmental justice case in Virginia provides a precedent for their own fight: In January 2020, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit ruled that Union Hill, a historically Black community about 70 miles west of Brown Grove, had not been properly consulted on the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline. In its decision, the court said that “environmental justice is not merely a box to be checked.”

search for graves instead of using ground-penetrating radar, which can be effective at locating old, unmarked graves. Wegmans representatives said that method wouldn’t work well in an environment with tree roots and other disturbances to the ground.

More pressingly, Brown Grove residents wonder why Wegmans would be comfortable disturbing potential graves at all. But Wegmans argues that it makes a big difference that the graves haven’t been located yet. “This land is commercially available, zoned industrial,” DeMascole says. “The fact that if these remains are there, and they have not been found or identified — should that mean that the land should just remain vacant forever?” He adds, “There’s other people that own this property, and they feel they have a right to sell the property. From our perspective, we found land that was zoned properly and said: This is in the perfect location, and we’re going to be good neighbors, and it’s all going to work out.”

After the February 2020 meeting, French and Bonnica joined a group called Protect Hanover, made up of residents from nearby subdivisions, that formed in opposition to the Wegmans project. The two hadn’t met before, but they quickly began poring over Freedom of Information Act requests and scheduling meetings with local and state politicians, activist groups and others who could help with the cause.

Bonnica soon brought in her sisters, Renada and Kimberlyn, and neighbors to help with the onslaught of work. The newly fledged activists found themselves spending hours each week reading historical, legal and scientific documents, holding meetings and planning community events. Even after a year of working to block the Wegmans site, Bonnica says, “It’s the center of our world right now.”

In February 2021, Virginia’s water control board met virtually to review Wegmans’s application and vote on whether the company could build on wetlands. At work, Renada held her comb in one hand and her phone, to text with other organizers, in the other, watching the online meeting on a laptop propped on her salon workstation. It was a Friday, the busiest day at the salon, and she couldn’t take off for the all-day meeting.

Renada told her client, who had an hours-long appointment, that she would be unusually quiet so she could focus on the meeting and then say her piece during the virtual public comment period. She had barely slept the night before, her nerves were coiled so tightly. Renada spoke to the board around 4 p.m., and the meeting went into the evening. Around 7, one of the board members announced they would cut short the public comments in order to hold a vote to approve or deny the permit for building on wetlands. The board voted: four in favor, three against. The permit passed, but with a much narrower margin than any of the activists had expected.

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In June, there were breakthroughs and new complications for both sides. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a federal permit, a key step for Wegmans to proceed with the project. After all permits are completed and the property is purchased, DeMascole says, Wegmans hopes to begin construction as soon as the end of the summer.

The news came as a shock to Renada, Bonnica and French. “You’ve got two lawsuits that are currently happening,” says French. “You’ve got now potentially a third that might occur” — a likely challenge to the federal permit in addition to those appealing the state’s decisions.

Wegmans also now needs an air-quality permit after including backup generators running on diesel power in the project’s site plan, according to Hanover County officials. This issue is raising a new round of concerns in the community about air pollution. “There’s a lot of people who would like to suggest this thing is a done deal,” says French, who has become the environmental justice chair of the local NAACP chapter. “It most definitely is not.”

A week after the federal permit was issued, Brown Grove took an important step toward recognition as a national historic district, which could help the activists’ cause. After the community submitted a detailed, heavily researched application, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources determined that Brown Grove is eligible for inclusion on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

The Corps permit is contingent on maintaining the existing state of known historical landmarks that fall under the protection of the National Historic Preservation Act. When the permit was issued, the only eligible landmarks were the Hanover Court House Battlefield and Merry Oaks Tavern; the latter is the only site to be affected by construction. But now, the entire community could qualify for the same or similar protections under the act. When reached for comment, a Corps spokesperson said via email that they had not yet received information about Brown Grove’s eligibility and would follow the same process that had guided the initial permit.

Gaining recognition as a historic site is a major milestone on its own, since only 2 percent of 95,000 entries on the National Register focused on the experiences of Black Americans as of 2020. The Brown Grove Preservation Group has begun fundraising to complete the process for the listing, which could not only assist in this fight but also help to forestall future development. “We’re going to stick to it till the end,” Renada says. “We don’t want to give in.”

Tyrese Coleman is a writer in Silver Spring, Md. Her first book, “How to Sit: A Memoir in Stories and Essays,” was a finalist for the PEN Open Book Award. Melody Schreiber is a journalist and the editor of “What We Didn’t Expect: Personal Stories About Premature Birth.”
D.C.’s new taste of France is a chef’s kiss

Closing one of the city’s best-known dining rooms after 27 years wasn’t the hard decision its fans might think it was. Just ask its owner.

“The Oval Room had run its course,” says Ashok Bajaj of the restaurant situated an easy stroll from the White House. While a roster of talented chefs — Bryan Moscatello, John Melfi, Tony Conte — made sure a stream of VIPs — Nancy Pelosi, Ty Cobb, seemingly every ambassador in town — was fed well over the decades, the twin challenges of the pandemic and the 2020 protests downtown helped seal the fate of the Oval Room. By the end, in the fall, the restaurant had switched to serving sandwiches for takeout.

Bajaj figured something French would make a suitable successor. Given that he already has American, Indian, Italian and modern Israeli restaurants in his portfolio, a Gallic entry “complements the group,” he says. He also wanted something livelier than before. “People want an uplift” after being stuck at home for so long. “I wanted a fun name,” too, says the man who famously visits all his restaurants every day. He chose La Bise, “the kiss,” partly for the way the French words roll off the tongue.

As for a chef, Bajaj looked to Boston and Troquet on South, but he previously worked in the Washington area at Fiola, 1789 and Macon Bistro & Larder.

Chef Tyler Stout came to La Bise from Troquet on South in Boston, but he previously worked in the Washington area at Fiola, 1789 and Macon Bistro & Larder.
In word and deed, he’s demonstrating how the past year has influenced his thinking. The chef says he wants La Bise to be thought of as other than a special occasion restaurant — “not too stuffy” and “not too high.” La Bise won’t be offering a $175 tasting menu, he says. That leaves plenty of room for polished whimsy. Order the $10 gougeres, and the light cheese puffs come with a little surprise: Comte espuma, or foam, inside their delicate shells.

Stout’s opening acts might sound familiar, but he has a way of making each his own. Kampachi crudo brings the expected thinly sliced raw fish. Topping it, however, are see-through slices of stone fruit — plums one visit, peaches another — along with the everywhere garnish, Fresno chile, and nutty puffed sorghum. Crudo tends to be refreshing; Stout makes it more so by serving the kampachi in a lick of clear tomato water. Between that and the stone fruit, it’s the equivalent of easing into a cool pool on a hot day. Sweet bites of butter-poached lobster mingle with elegant potato rounds and celery leaves in another seafood draw, set on sauce Americaine, which gets a lift from crushed tomatoes, saffron, onions and wine.

Raise your hand if you Netflixed “My Octopus Teacher” and swore off the sea animal afterward. A little distance from the underwater love story found me slicing into a fried tentacle at La Bise, mostly because I wanted to taste what the chef paired with the octopus: toasted hazelnuts and a tip of the chapeau to a “Veronique” approach — green grapes hit with espelette pepper and tufts of foam coaxed from champagne, grape juice, butter and more.

Stout makes everything on his charcuterie board but the earthy Bayon ham, which looks like prosciutto but has a drier texture. The meaty spread embraces duck rillettes, head cheese made from delicious pig parts and hinting of star anise, and caramelized onions, which are dark, sticky and swollen with reduced balsamic vinegar. The only flaw in the picnic is the accompanying tasteless white bread, a detail not in keeping with the otherwise high standards of the kitchen.

Ricotta dumplings, another first course, were dense and pasty when I tried them, although a shower of sweet corn, Pecorino cheese and chanterelles did their best to distract the tongue.

Now and then, a chef comes up with something that launches legions of copies. The molten chocolate cake created by New York chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten made such an impression; versions of it trickled down to fast-food menus. And rare is the Indian restaurant in Washington that doesn’t feature some version of the fabulous palak chaat introduced by Vikram Sunderam at the original Rasika. The most talked-about main course at La Bise is salmon coulibiac, basically a fish version of beef Wellington in which a band of puff pastry and mushroom duxelles form a frame around the salmon and rice tinted with parsley puree. Visiting on Bastille Day, a friend texted me: “the salmon entree made me weep!” While I didn’t shed any tears when I ate it, the coulibiac, based on a Russian recipe, did prompt me to whip out my phone and take a photo of the dish, pretty in pink and green and displayed on a thick and lemony butter sauce. I might not have cried, but I liked the art enough to ask for half of it to be wrapped for later appreciation, and I wouldn’t be surprised to see replicas around town down the line.

You can find a proper steak frites at La Bise. But the superior red meat is the butter-basted duck breast served as a bar
alongside rich confit leg on a sunny yellow corn sauce decorated with pickled blueberries.

Stout wanted a vegetarian main course on par with the rest of his menu, and the North Carolina native has it with a tomato tart that uses as its base an herbed biscuit, in which summery pesto and buttery burrata also add their charms.

A petite soufflé is the most theatrical way to conclude dinner. The cherry flavor, however, is but a whisper. I welcome everything about the Paris-Brest: its tender round of choux pastry, its creamy whipped filling, the gentle crunch of praline and slivered almonds in each bite. Meanwhile, tiny housemade marshmallows sometimes sweeten the drop of the check. (“We have a lot of egg whites” left over from cooking, says the chef.)

The reimagined interior gives diners the “uplift” the owner sought. Bajaj kept the collection of lights in the center of the main dining room that could pass for illumination on a film set. But he changed just about every other detail. More booths mean more privacy, a nice accessory given the restaurant’s proximity to the corridors of power (or really, anyone hoping to have a personal conversation). The walls are splashy in dark blue, and what aren’t paintings are 1,000 small mirrors in a 3-D art installation. For the first time ever, thanks to an open kitchen near the front bar, the chef at this address is on display.

Designed for fun, La Bise delivers. (Among the drinks you’ll want to try is — get ready for it — La Bise Knees.) Better yet, the newcomer also feels built to last.

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Solution to Gene Weingarten’s column (Page 28)

Holmes knew that the floors in old houses, hastily constructed, are susceptible to “sloping.” Typically, the slope leads from the edge of a room to the middle, where the joists are farthest from supporting structures. Holmes used the golf ball to ascertain that, when it was placed on the floor in front of the study, it rolled toward the door.

Satisfied he was on the right path, he then poured the consommé outside the door. It was the approximate viscosity of urine. It seeped beneath the door and collected in the centre of the room. Now the solution was clear to us all: Denied access to her favorite bathroom, Lexington had peed as close to it as she could get. The towel was for mop-up. The tobacco, spoon, hypo, cotton swab and matches were to satisfy Holmes’s vilest habits, often indulged after a successful deduction.

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KEY TO THE PREVIOUS SECOND GLANCE
AUG. 1

1. Missing support
2. Filled in
3. Seeing triple
4. More flowers
5. No handle
6. Turned bracket
7. Lost handle
8. Another line
9. No writing
10. Shortened handle
11. Missing bracket
12. Longer handle

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE
“PLACES, PLEASE,” AUG. 1

Take the letter of each hit song indicated by its peak position on the Billboard Hot 100 to spell out “POSITIONS,” a No. 1 hit for Ariana Grande (whose nickname is at 123 Across).

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PREVIOUS WEEK’S SOLUTION
BY EVAN BIRNHOLZ
SOLUTION TO: PLACES, PLEASE (AUG. 1)
**Junk drawer**

BY RANDY MAYS

Find the 12 differences in the photo of a junk drawer at a residence in North Potomac in November.

**PUZZLE ANSWERS**

See them online now at washingtonpost.com/secondglance or in the Aug. 22 issue of the magazine.

There will be no Aug. 15 issue of the magazine.

**SEE YOUR PHOTO**

To submit a photo of the Washington area for use in Second Glance, email a high-resolution jpeg attachment of 8 megapixels or larger to secondglance@washpost.com. For information about our guidelines for user content, see washingtonpost.com/secondglance.
ACROSS
1 Worked on the dishes, in a way
7 Firm in one’s position
14 Prohibit
20 Of Swiss skiing resorts
21 Cedar or spruce, e.g.
22 Cornell University locale
23 G-Men of the NFL
24 Signify
25 Enrolled in
26 Teaching class for actor Adam?
29 Glass-roofed rooms
32 Ceases
33 Areas at car dealerships
34 Sections of brains
38 “That’s All____Wrote” (Reba McEntire song)
39 First installment, as of a film series
41 Tent-securing post
43 Tumult
44 “Sharknado” actor Ziering
45 Humanities class for singer Neiko?
49 0, in soccer matches
50 Celebratory event
53 Short line on a map?
54 Was untruthful with
57 Social science class for chef Julia?
64 Italian isle that’s home to the Blue Grotto
67 Yes, on a pirate ship
68 “Electric Arches” author L. Ewing
69 Post-makeover description
73 Edmonton NHL pro
74 Junior’s H.S. exam
76 Parisienne’s assent
77 Something or ________
78 Produces pictures
79 Creative design class for ski racer Picabo?
81 Racetrack leaders?
82 Works with needles
84 Many visitors of Sunyohji Park
85 Green pasta topping
86 “Once Upon a Time in Hollywood” Oscar winner Brad
87 Firecracker noise
88 _____ cube tray
89 Color of the first bird used in “Angry Birds”
90 Shepherded creature
92 University of Maryland athlete, for short
94 PC port initials
95 Osmond who sang “Paper Roses”
97 Horses’ stripes
99 “Excellent!” in the ’80s
100 Greek letter hidden in “epsilon”
101 Environmental science class for singer Keith?
105 Weird AI comedy that shows a trailer for “Conan the Librarian” on Channel 62
106 Sahara safe spaces
108 Animate, with “up”
109 Brand of briefs
110 One purchasing the program Final Cut Pro
111 Related to the ankle
112 Performance class for comedian Chris?
113 One purchasing the program Final Cut Pro
115 Related to the ankle
116 Language class for singer Robert?
117 For fear that
118 Cheering noise that can be preceded by “hur”
119 Cheering noise that can be preceded by “hur”
120 Boss in a boardroom
121 Not ready for ______ time
122 “Rizoli & Isles” actress Harmon
123 “By faith ______ offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain”; Hebrews 11:4
124 One pulling on an invisible rope
125 TV fare with affairs
126 “Oh, I wish I were an Oscar _______ wiener” (old ad jingle lyric)
127 Villainous half of a literary dual personality
128 ExxonMobil brand in Canada
129 Person known for the Mach number
130 Oregon state’s capitol
131 The Menaced Assassin painter Magritte
132 Sitcom star Arnaz
133 Modes of pronunciation
134 Like the situation in Game 7 of the NBA Finals
135 Queen ______ Revenge (ship captured by Blackbeard in 1717)
136 Like one-run home runs
137 Something read by a telepath, in science fiction
138 Total price after taxes and discounts
139 Buy for, as a meal
140 Island nation that hosts an annual hibiscus festival
141 Run _____ of (get into trouble with)
142 Trissy’s berry
143 Fox ______ Ren (“Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker” character)
144 Island nation that hosts an annual hibiscus festival
145 Peter who provided the voice of Anton Ego in “Ratatouille”
146 Hornd megaherbivore
147 Prohibit
148 ____ cube tray
149 Lionel Richie, to Nicole
150 2005 Womenswear Designer of the Year award winner Wang
151 Bygone autocrat
152 “Oh, like that’ll ever happen!”
153 Suesong hai cuisine
154 “The Menaced Assassin” painter Magritte
155 Team?
156 “Mwah” sound
157 Natural science class for singer Robert?
158 Festival of Lights item
159 Post-apocalyptic society, say
160 Some green fruits
161 Cartoon foe of Skeleton
162 Across the Atlantic, say
163 Granted for a time
164 Atlantic swimmers
165 Greeting with a ______
166 Atlantic swimmers
167 Fluctuating, as a mood
168 Natural science class for singer Robert?
169 For fear that
170 Celebratory event
171 Fluctuating, as a mood
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A simple process of elimination

The following account is true, except for the participation of Holmes and Watson.

From the reminiscences of John Watson, M.D.

In reading my notes from the summer of ’21, I encountered the facts of a case which exemplifies the particular deductive skills of my friend Sherlock Holmes. It was early afternoon in the flat we shared. Holmes was brutishly walloping a raw ham rump with a cricket bat, to test a theory about the bruising of flesh in homicidal attacks. The great detective stopped and said, “I hear a step upon the stair. It will be a slovenly mustached man of advanced age.”

It was, indeed. “Holmes, you astound me,” I whispered. “How could you have known that?” “I saw him through the window,” Holmes whispered back, “walking up to our door.”

Our visitor was in a pitiful state of agitation. His hair was frighteningly disheveled. His Semitic features suggested intelligence, but his shambling gait and inattention to his tonsure and sartorial presence suggested a man under extraordinary stress. He said: “I have a locked-room mystery, Mr. Holmes, and I fear it will strain even your talents …”

Holmes’s eyes twinkled. Instantly, he was fully engaged.

The man’s story was relatively simple. The wretched fellow had obtained a new pet, a 1-year-old hound who had been inadequately civilized by her previous owner. Her name was Lexington. She did not understand the common courtesies incumbent upon a household animal. She unburdened herself at will, passing water in the house, often in one particular room, a second-floor study. And so our visitor, reasonably, closed the door. And yet, puddles of the abominable liquid continued to appear in the centre of the room, day after day!

Holmes began to pace. “Were the windows open, or openable, from the exterior of the home, perhaps penetrable? Might they be susceptible to entrance from, say, an ourang-outang? My police colleague, C. Auguste Dupin, encountered just such a praeternaturally nimble villain.”

The windows were closed and locked, the man said. “Was the door locked with a latchkey?” I interjected. There was silence in the room. I fancied I’d stumbled upon something important. Eventually, Holmes turned to me and said, “It is your thesis, Watson, that a dog — lacking opposable thumbs or even a semblance of intellect or cunning — could manipulate a doorknob, walk into a room, perform as she wished, then exit the room and primly close the door after herself so as to disguise her crime?”

Holmes turned back to our guest.

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Holmes turned back to our guest.

“Picture the room in your mind,” he said, crisply. “Is there a bell rope to summon servants?” “No, sir. We have no servants.” “Might there be a small aperture in the ceiling, perhaps at the base of a chandelier, through which a viper might slither, drop to the ground and deposit his venom upon the floor? Were you careful in handling this excrescence? I encountered just such an event once, and it was part of a sinister and deadly plot.”

The ceiling was unbreached, the man said, and added, a little starchily, that the excrescence clearly was what it appeared to be. Holmes rose. “This is a most singular case, sir, and I shall be honored to take it on. We must go to the scene. I fear there is no time to lose.”

The home was one of several in a row, built in 1936 during the depths of the American Depression. It was comfortable and well appointed but clearly the work of common craftsmen who were paid for their skill and their haste, but not too well. Holmes produced a magnifying glass and got down on his knees. Then, after mere moments, he improbably turned to his host and said, “I believe I have solved it. When you eliminate the impossible, whatever is left, however improbable, is the answer. Please bring me a tablespoon, a bowl of soup — chicken consommé, if possible — a cotton swab, a golf ball, two kitchen matches, a hypodermic needle, some decent shag tobacco and a large towel suitable for the bath.”

In minutes, Holmes had cracked the case. How did he do it? The answer is on Page 25.

Email Gene Weingarten at gene.weingarten@washpost.com. Twitter: @geneweingarten. For previous columns, visit wapo.st/weingarten.

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