

STL Equity Matters

Welcome to the 30th edition of our newsletter: STL Equity Matters ...

How It Works: We shine a light on how race, ethnicity, religion, and gender are lived in our region.

Who Is Behind This: This newsletter is brought to you by the [River City Journalism Fund](#), a nonprofit journalism project formerly known as Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson. This rebranding and new collaboration bring additional resources and brainpower that will boost reporting on local government, the environment, criminal justice, the arts, the business community, and more.



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Let's dive in ...



Francis Howell School District board member Chad Lange rubs his forehead in frustration as another member proposes delaying approval of changes to part of the district's curriculum during a meeting on Thursday, March 21, 2024. All the proposed changes later passed. (Photo by David Carson for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch)

1. Battle for the Souls of Our School Districts

What's New: The culture wars in a variety of school districts played out over the last several weeks with several key elections and the departure of a superintendent. It's hard to say who at the moment has the upper hand, but the momentum seems more on the side of those who want a greater focus on children and outcomes than on scoring political points.

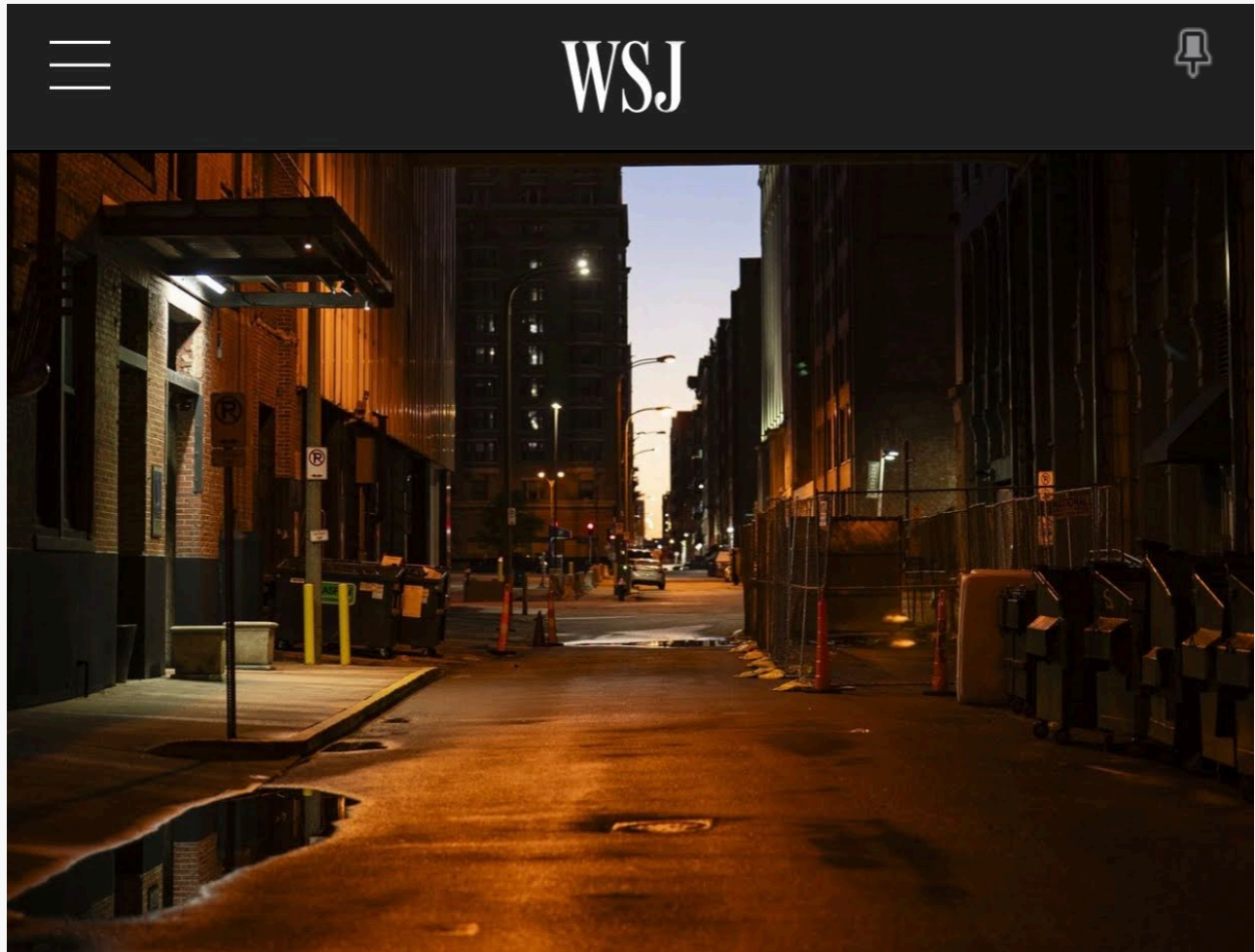
The Scorecard: Voters in the Rockwood and Francis Howell school districts voted in moderate candidates, though each board still has a majority of conservatives holding sway. Wentzville ousted its pro-diversity superintendent at the cost of nearly \$1 million. Score one for the culture warriors, but they may be facing a lot of blowback over that price tag.

Some Good Reporting: The Post-Dispatch's Blythe Bernhard and Monica Obradovic kept us informed with both breaking news and deeply reported stories providing context and meaning to events. Bernhard oversees a Facebook group called Chalk Talk, regularly stocked with updates (not all concerning controversy). The comments (unlike many you find on mainstream media sites) are worth reading because they come from highly engaged parents and teachers.

Go Deeper:

- Monica Obradovic: How a fight over Black studies fueled a fight for the soul of a school district. [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).

- Monica Obradovic and Blythe Bernhard: Results at the polls reflect an electorate weary of school culture wars. [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).
- Blythe Bernhard: Wentzville superintendent gets more than \$1 million in contract buyout. [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).
- Monica Obradovic: Reaction mixed to buyout. [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).



Wall Street Journal screen capture portraying desolate downtown St. Louis.

2. 'Doom Loop' Story Prompts Civic Handwringing

What's New: The Wall Street Journal published a story describing a "doom loop" in downtown St. Louis in which businesses and restaurants were leaving as crime, vagrancy, and disorder began taking hold.

Why It Matters: For a city losing population and battling negative perceptions nationwide, the story only contributes to that very loop. Civic leaders have responded in a variety of ways. Some say the story was overblown and overlooked many positive indicators. Others say the story should prompt the city to reassess and recalibrate its approach to public safety and revitalizing downtown. Others offered solutions.

Go Deeper: Here's a selection of stories that address the "doom loop" matter:

- [The Wall Street Journal story](#). (It's behind a paywall if you are not a subscriber, but a two-minute audio clip provides a nice summary.)
- Doom-loop solutions from senior editor Nicholas Phillips at [St. Louis Magazine](#).
- Mayor Tishaura Jones and Jason Hall, CEO of Greater St. Louis Inc., present their take in the commentary section of the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).
- [The Post-Dispatch editorial board](#) weighs in.
- The Donnybrookers debated the doom loop at their annual Donnybash at the Sheldon on April 11. [This link](#) is to an audio version of the event.



Gerald Early, author of *Play Harder: The Triumph of Black Baseball in America*.

3. Gerald Early's Fresh Take for the Hall of Fame

What's New: Gerald Early, the Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters in the African and African American Studies Department at Washington University, discussed his work as a consultant to the National Baseball Hall of Fame and the museum's newly renovated and reconceived exhibit on Black baseball.

Why It Matters: Early also has a book coming out, *Play Harder: The Triumph of Black Baseball in America* (Ten Speed Press, November 2024), that goes all the way back to the end of the Civil War and continues through the integration of Major League Baseball to the present, addressing why Black American participation is dwindling.

Early noted the upcoming exhibit at the Hall of Fame "goes beyond sports" to finding inspiration in the

struggle to share their talents with the nation.

"The thing I think is uplifting for all of us is thinking about Black people making this effort because they thought being an American was worth the effort."

Go Deeper: Here is the [video of the presentation](#). Courtesy of the WashU Alumni Association and Arts & Sciences.



Jackie Joyner-Kersey is leading an effort to build a subdivision — East St. Louis' first market-rate housing development in decades. (Photo by Zachary Linhares for the Riverfront Times.)

4. Realizing a Dream for East St. Louis

What's New: Olympian Jackie Joyner-Kersey and river-barge magnate Mark Mestemacher are collaborating to build Landsdowne Park in East St. Louis, with homes going on the market soon.

Why It Matters: Chris Andoe writes: "In 1950, East St. Louis was the fourth-largest city in Illinois, with a population north of 82,000. Today, only 17,000 call the beleaguered community home. It will be the first market-rate subdivision to be built there in 50 years,

Background: Joyner has long been at work giving back to the community where she grew up, including developing the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Center, an athletic and community center that unfortunately shut down only a year after opening. Mestemacher had run a wrestling program at the center.

"With their shared passion for helping children, a love of sports, and deep religious faith, the two bonded instantly," Andoe writes in the Riverfront Times. "Mestemacher took their connection as a sign from God that he needed to adopt Joyner-Kersey's dream for East St. Louis as his own. He joined the Center's board and personally paid off the substantial debts. After two years of rebuilding the organization, the Center resumed operations in 2012."

Go Deeper: Now the collaboration continues. Read Andoe's story in the [Riverfront Times](#).

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5. Will We Need to Pony Up for the Cards?

What's New: Hard to fathom but Busch Stadium is now 18 years old and needs refurbishing, according to Cards owner Bill DeWitt Jr. If past is prologue, the team leadership will seek financial incentives borne by the taxpayers. But Eric Berger, writing for the River City Journalism Fund, cites critics who say investments in stadia rarely provide the return that promoters promise.

Why It Matters: Berger examined stadium financing nationwide and finds that most economists agree

that public funding for a stadium just moves money around. “It’s not stimulating any economic development whatsoever,” says J.C. Bradbury, a Kennesaw State University economics professor who studies public funding of stadiums.

Fuzzy Math?: A recent press release from Explore St. Louis and Greater St. Louis Inc., two groups that promote economic development and tourism, stated the stadium would generate \$310 million in economic impact for the St. Louis metro area because of items such as ticket purchases; food and entertainment at or near the stadium; and out-of-town visitors staying at hotels. They also cite “indirect economic impact,” meaning “business-to-business purchases in the regional supply chain that stem from the initial direct purchases.”

Bradbury calls that release a “fantasy document” because of research showing that stadiums just draw money away from other entertainment options. Plus, he has never seen any stadium generate that much revenue.

What’s Next: After Berger’s report, DeWitt told the [St. Louis Business Journal](#) that while Busch Stadium will likely need a “big infusion of capital” in the years ahead to extend its life, it’s too soon to know if the Cardinals plan to seek public funding to assist with improvements.

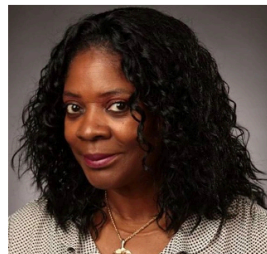
“Nobody is talking about how we’re going to finance yet. It’s so premature to say something remotely implying that we’re out there asking for public assistance,” DeWitt said.

Go Deeper:

- Read Berger’s cover story at the [Riverfront Times](#).
- Listen to Berger discuss the story with Elaine Cha, host of *St. Louis on the Air* at [St. Louis Public Radio](#).



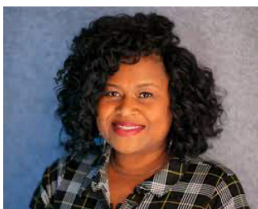
Precious Barry



Denise Hollinshed



Tracy Hutter



Christina Sneed

New River City Journalism Fund board members.

6. River City Journalism Fund Welcomes New Board Members

What's New: Precious Barry, Denise Hollinshed, Tracy Hutter, and Christina Sneed were welcomed to the River City Journalism Fund board on April 24, 2024. The new members bring a diversity of skills and lived experiences to our nonprofit at a time when local journalism faces a crisis in covering the bases when it comes to covering social-justice stories.

Precious Barry: Precious, finishing her freshman year at Washington University, is a youth activist, public speaker and newly minted author of a children's book, *Why I Use My Voice*. Precious became RCJF's first contributor to the Commentariat, a group of young people of color who are encouraged to have their work published in mainstream media. Her recent commentary in the St. Louis Post Dispatch — "[Overcoming Imposter Syndrome](#)" — drew a strong response.

Denise Hollinshed: Denise served two decades (1998-2019) as a general assignment and public safety reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. She started her journalism career in 1990 with the Belleville News-Democrat. Over the years, Denise focused on an array of social-justice issues, including child welfare, housing, affirmative action, and education.

Tracy Hutter: Tracy is founder of Hutter CPA, LLC. The firm aims to bring financial clarity to businesses and nonprofit organizations to help them prosper and grow. Before creating her own agency, Tracy spent 10 years at public accounting firms where she worked with a variety of industries, most notably nonprofit, SaaS, start-up, and service industries.

Christina Sneed: Christina is a proud wife, mother, educator, and religious leader with more than 16 years of education and teaching experience in the areas of English language arts, political science, speech communication, secondary education, communication training and development, and educational leadership. She is currently the curriculum coordinator for English language arts and reading instruction for the School District of University City.

Go Deeper: More about the [new members and the incumbents](#).



Tracey Bryant



Taylor Harris



Twinette Johnson



Kris Kleindienst

7. Congratulations to ...

Tracey (Tre') Arelious Bryant. The founder and CEO of [Renew Life Properties](#), a firm that invests in residential real estate. He will be honored as Minority-Owned Small Business Person of the Year during the annual Small Business Association Awards on May 2.

Taylor Harris: A freelance journalist based in St. Louis, Harris has won a [Local Investigations Fellowship](#) with the New York Times. The program, which is led by Dean Baquet, a former executive editor of the Times, gives journalists the opportunity to produce investigative work focused on the state or region they're reporting from. Their reporting will be published by the Times and made available free for co-publication by local newsrooms. Harris is a graduate of Howard University and will write about the courts and bail-bond systems in the St. Louis area. (Photo of Harris by Hillary Levin for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.)

Twinette Johnson: Johnson has been named the next permanent dean of Saint Louis University School of Law. She will succeed William Johnson, who has served as dean since 2017. Start date: July 1, 2024.

Johnson, a former SLU LAW faculty member who earned both her B.A. and Ph.D. degrees at SLU, She currently serves as the dean and professor of law at UDC Law in Washington, D.C., a position she has held since 2022.

Kris Kleindienst: The owner of [Left Bank Books](#), Kleindienst was recognized with the Michele Karlsberg Leadership Award by way of the Publishing Triangle. The award honors contributions to LGBTQ literature by those who are not primarily writers, such as editors, agents, booksellers, and institutions, and is funded with the support of Michele Karlsberg, head of the eponymous marketing and publicity firm. [The Publishing Triangle](#) is an association of LGBTQ people in publishing.



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