

The Providence Journal

THURSDAY
JANUARY 4, 2007

SOUTH COUNTY
EDITION

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HIGHER & HIGHER
Temperatures will climb into the low 50s today and fall to the mid-40s tonight.
Forecast, F12
50¢
\$2.40 per week by carrier

2006 New England Newspaper of the Year

THE NEW CONGRESS



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / BILL MURPHY

Sheldon Whitehouse, who will be sworn in today as a U.S. senator, says he is accustomed to being "the new kid."

A FRESH AGENDA

Whitehouse ready to join in the new Democratic majority

BY JOHN MULLIGAN
JOURNAL WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse will be sworn in today as the 48th United States senator from Rhode Island, with his wife, children and siblings looking on and his party assuming majority power by the thinnest of margins.

Whitehouse will begin his service with important assets, he said in an interview yesterday on Capitol Hill. As the victor in a campaign that played heavily to Rhode Island's strong opposition to specific Republican policies, Whitehouse said he enjoys a clear set of legislative priorities.

As the son of a diplomat who was posted around the globe, Whitehouse said he is accustomed to being "the new kid" who must quickly assimilate the ways of an unfamiliar place.

On the policy front, Whitehouse said he will hew closely in the opening days of the 110th Congress to the agenda set by incoming Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada and his deputies.

Key issues on the Democratic list for early action include ethics reform and an increase in the minimum wage — both of which Whitehouse promised to seek during his winning campaign against Sen. Lincoln D. Chafee.

Like most legislators, Whitehouse will derive much of his direction from the committees to which he has been assigned. His chief assignments are to the Judiciary Committee, the Environment and Public Works Committee and the Budget Committee. Another significant assignment, to the Senate Select

SEE WHITEHOUSE, A7



NYT / DOUG MILLS

New speaker set to make history

Starting today, Americans will have a chance to come to know Nancy Pelosi, the first female speaker of the House. A look at the woman who will be the third most powerful person in government. **Story, A7**

Grand jury's questions not answered

Transcripts released by a defense lawyer show that grand jurors' efforts to elicit answers from West Warwick Fire Marshal Denis P. Larocque were sometimes sidetracked by prosecutors.

BY PAUL EDWARD PARKER
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

State prosecutors deflected difficult questions away from West Warwick's fire marshal several times while he testified before the grand jury that investigated the Station nightclub fire, according to transcripts that were divulged yesterday.

STATION FIRE DISASTER

The normally secret transcripts were provided to The Providence Journal and the Associated Press by Kathleen M. Haggerty, a criminal defense lawyer who represented the brothers who owned the nightclub. In this case, the Superior Court has removed the veil of secrecy shroud-



PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / MARY MURPHY

Denis P. Larocque, West Warwick's fire marshal, was responsible for the inspection of the Station nightclub.

ing the transcripts and ordered Attorney General Patrick C. Lynch to make the testimony public.

Lynch, who has said he hopes

SEE STATION, A4

Emergency radio system in state ranked poorly

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security says the ability of local emergency workers to communicate with others during a crisis is among the worst in the nation.

BY AMANDA MILKOVITS
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

As firefighters, police officers and other responders from all over Rhode Island struggled to save people from the Station nightclub fire, they were also battling to talk to each other on incompatible radio frequencies.

Nearly four years later, the radio chatter in Rhode Island is still mostly one-sided.

A federal report released yesterday ranked the smallest state in the nation at the bottom in having a usable communications system — even though the deadly nightclub fire illuminated these problems in 2003.

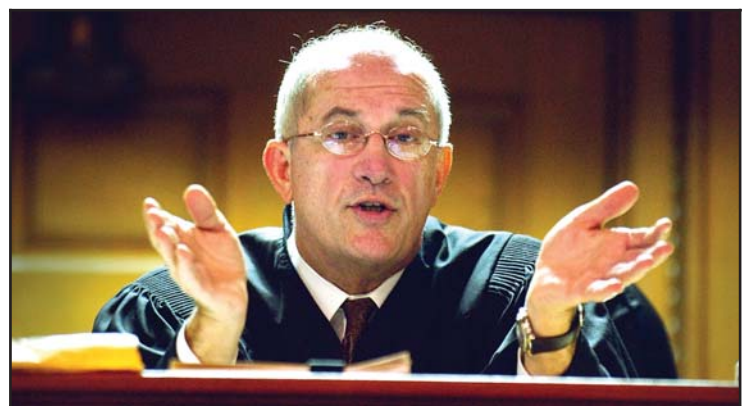
Firefighters, police officers, and other emergency officials rushing to a major crisis must be able to communicate with each other. The trouble is, in many states, including Rhode Island, they still can't.

"We don't have it. We know we don't have it. We're working on getting it," said Robert J. Warren, the executive director of the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency.

The U.S. Department of

SEE RADIO, A9

Fortunato to step down from his 'dream job'



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / ANDREW DICKERMAN

Superior Court Judge Steven J. Fortunato Jr. will retire next month after more than 12 years on the bench.

The outspoken Superior Court judge, who has ruled on numerous high-profile cases, plans to pursue a career in academia after he retires early next month.

BY TRACY BRETON
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — Superior Court Judge Stephen J. Fortunato Jr., one of the state's most controversial jurists, is retiring, effective Feb. 1 — the day after he turns 65.

He says he plans to continue teaching law school classes and

is also interested in teaching on the undergraduate level. He also wants to spend more time writing scholarly articles about the law, politics and world affairs and to craft more op-ed pieces.

Fortunato said he is also looking forward to more volunteer work with the Family Life Center, which helps to integrate prisoners back into the community. He currently serves on the center's board of directors.

"For me this was a dream job. I continue to enjoy my job every day but there is a world beyond the judicial system," Fortunato

SEE FORTUNATO, A4

State wants to track cases of pneumonia

Parents who call a school to report a child's absence will be asked whether the child has pneumonia.

BY FELICE J. FREYER
JOURNAL MEDICAL WRITER

Health officials are asking school departments around the state to help track cases of pneumonia, watching for any spread of the illness that caused encephalitis in three West Bay youngsters late last year.

The state Department of Health and doctors from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are devising a system to detect any unusual incidence of mycoplasma pneumoniae, a common bacteria, among school-

children in Rhode Island. Mycoplasma rarely causes serious illness but mysteriously led to three cases of encephalitis in children in Warwick and West Warwick, one of whom died on Dec. 21.

"We are continuing to work to determine if there is ongoing spread of mycoplasma, such as pneumonia or sinusitis," said Dr. David R. Gifford, director of the state Department of Health. "We're working on a more standardized way of collecting information on why kids are absent."

SEE ILLNESS, A8

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Children's HOLIDAY HOPE Fund
A COLLABORATION OF THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL, SANTA FUND AND HASBRO
A total of \$4,689.20 has been donated.
See latest donations on Page B3

PC SCORES MAJOR UPSET
Providence's women's basketball team scores a 106-94 double overtime upset win over previously unbeaten Louisville. **C5**

WHY IT'S SO HARD TO BE GOOD
If you're already beginning to backslide on those New Year's resolutions, you're not alone; experts explain why it's so hard to change for the better. **E2**



IT'S BEEN ALL DOWNHILL FOR SKI AREAS
Warm temperatures and the absence of snow spell trouble for New England ski areas, especially those in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. **F1**