

Pilot program to help students with autism gets funding

By LISA CAPOBIANCO
STAFF WRITER

Bristol students with autism soon will have an opportunity to learn social and pragmatic skills through robots for the first time.

Later this month, the Movia Robotics pilot program will kick off at Stafford School and Hubbell School where two classrooms will take part in 20 to 30 minute lessons in small group settings for two times a week over a two-month period.

Established five years ago as a research and development entity, Movia is the first company to use robots and interactive software to teach academic, behavioral,

and life skills to children with autism.

A facilitator from Movia will work with teachers and service staff to identify common needs among the students. Through engagement with the Movia robot, students will acquire social and pragmatic communication skills, mindfulness skills, as well as a connection to literacy.

Director of Special Services Dr. Michael Dieter said the program marks an exciting way to start something unique that enhances what the district already provides to students.

"We're looking to compliment our existing resources and our existing

platform," said Dieter. "It is meant to enhance the effectiveness of the service provider in a way that engages the student, and it's innovative."

Recently, the Board of Education accepted grant funding the district received from Barnes Group, Main Street Community Foundation and the Stocker Foundation.

Once the pilot program is completed, Dieter said the first step is to start the program on a small scale to determine whether to expand it.

"Although we've targeted cohorts of students who have a common identification, we've also had the abil-

ity to include those students with non-disabled peers. That would be something we're interested in exploring down the road," said Dieter.

With seven years of research, patented technology and a successful pilot program in West Hartford Public Schools, Movia works with channel partners to offer therapy and technology directly to children in the classroom. The company's software system combines knowledge and expertise from education, psychology, physical therapy, speech pathology, robotics, speech recognition and artificial intelligence.

This past summer,

Movia took first place in the StartUp Bristol business plan competition, winning a \$50,000 grant for its relocation costs to the Walter Ingraham Mansion in Bristol.

Last spring, the program was well-received by students and staff when it was first introduced. Dieter recalled how the program caught the attention of a nonverbal student, who became so engaged with the robot that he took a next step in basic language for the first time.

"There were many people who were touched to see that," said Dieter. "That was an example of an exchange that really rein-

forced for us that is something that's potentially going to be very useful for our students."

Through the program, Dieter said he hopes students will use the skills they learn inside the classroom, at home and in the community.

"Given that they're so engaged and so motivated to participate, we're really hoping this will increase their skill acquisition and their ability to generalize," said Dieter.

For more information about the Movia Robotics pilot program, contact the district's Special Services Department at (860) 584-7051.

Zoppo-Sassu: Democratic candidate for mayor

From page 1

Bristol and neighboring towns can visit to eat, shop, and be entertained. I applaud the hospital's commitment and look forward to working with them. Overall, we need people living and working downtown, so existing and new businesses have a base from which to thrive. We need a mayor that can execute development deals, rather than constantly tease that they're in the works, and yet nothing ever comes to fruition.

Which phrase do you agree with... Bristol is a city on the rise or Bristol is a city in stagnation? Why do you feel that way? If it's on the rise, what can be done to ensure that direction is maintained? If you feel it's stagnant, how can we get ourselves "unstuck?"

We are treading water, with the biggest hurdle being our own attention span. Meaningful development takes a lot of work and time and our current "take whatever we can get right now" attitude is a recipe for failure. We have been

attempting to reinvent our downtown since the '60s and we haven't managed to do it yet. The big empty lot downtown remains big and empty. For every PODS that enters Bristol, there is a Barley Vine, Frankie's or an Ultimate Wireforms that packs up and leaves. Class sizes are increasing. A strong education system is the best marketing tool a community has for economic development. The mayor's constant war with the BOE is a marketing disaster. It sends a message that education is a low priority.

Are we doing enough for economic development in Bristol? If no, what should be done to spur growth? If yes, what are doing to spur growth and why is this a positive thing?

The most vibrant communities can always be doing more. Widening the scope is a good start, as well as finding strategies to combat the state's economic climate. Job training programs, methods for shared services, coordinated advertising strategies, preferen-

tial hiring and bids for local vendors all could be factors in combating the stifling cost of doing business. The strategy needs to be two-fold - recruiting as well as retaining existing businesses who may need a little assistance to expand.

Put yourself in the shoes of your opponent for the mayor's seat. What do you think his biggest criticism of you is? And how would you counter that criticism?

My opponent tells everyone that I'm on record as saying residents of Bristol don't pay enough in taxes. Despite my inquiries, he hasn't been able to produce the PROOF of where or when I said that - but that's my opponent's modus operandi. He likes to embellish his record and lie about others. I've never said citizens of Bristol don't pay enough in taxes. Rather, I question if we're getting the most out of our tax dollars. I question if we're spending taxpayer money responsibly and efficiently. I see that our property values are slipping and the quality of our

schools and the quality of life is diminishing. That's what I want to fix. I want to raise property values and the quality of life in Bristol - not taxes. And ironically, when he had two major policy initiatives that directly impact quality of life that needed to get done - MBS and code enforcement - he appointed me to chair them.

Then as yourself, what is your biggest criticism of your opponent and why are you the better alternative?

This administration is form over substance, never mind ethically challenged, which puts the city in a bad light. In election years he moves a little dirt around to give the illusion of progress and attends a lot of ribbon cuttings so he gets his picture taken. Motion and static activity is not progress. Manipulation of crime, job creation, and unemployment rate data - and then taking credit for it and putting it on a billboard - is ridiculous. Nothing he has done is sustainable or has long term value. Bristol is a strong mayor form of gov-

ernment. This is a job, not a performance.

The complete lack of a strategic plan leaves us open to a catastrophe if our larger taxpayers and employers continue to face challenges. While we've landed some small businesses we've also lost some mid-sized ones. We need to have a strategy to attract all levels. We have no insurance policy against a major loss. A well-defined strategic plan that considers downside "what ifs" is badly needed.

The city also has no strategy for restaurants-they live and die on their own. Other communities do a much better job on promoting restaurants because they tend to be the heart of economic development.

Finally is there an issue you have not been asked about that you feel is vital to voters, why and how would you address it?

There are many issues that need to be addressed. The lack of accountability and transparency in financial matters like his refusal to account for code enforce-

ment and demolition expenses, no-bid contracting, and no plan for re-use and restoration of these code properties; His own spending, which included renovating and soundproofing his office, as well as his poor attendance record at commission meetings he is supposed to be chairing (and thus leading). Also, the complete lack of interest in the opioid public health crisis and its impact on Bristol families and businesses, as well as how we are responding to and delivering services. I have issued platform pieces on all of the above, www.ellenzoppoassu.com

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CORRECTION

The Bristol Democratic Town Committee is **NOT** affiliated with Mike Boguslawski's campaign for Bristol Town Treasurer. Ads ran erroneously stating the committee had paid for his ads. The Step Saver Observer regrets any confusion that this may have caused.

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