

## Records: A former Connecticut official's daughter landed a job as a firm was awarded no-bid contracts

By Dave Altimari and Andrew Brown

A construction management firm at the center of a federal grand jury probe into school construction grants got two no-bid contracts worth a combined \$530,000 to oversee the building of a new elementary school in Tolland — during the same period of time it hired the daughter of Konstantinos Diamantis.

The elder Diamantis had been the director of the state Office of School Construction Grants and Review until he resigned Oct. 28.

Tolland officials hired Construction Advocacy Professionals, or CAP,

based in Plainfield, to first oversee installation of portable classrooms at the Birch Grove Primary School on June 20, 2019, according to contracts obtained by the Connecticut Mirror. They were paid \$70,000 for the work.

Then, in July 2019, CAP hired Diamantis' daughter Anastasia, documents state.

Weeks later, a contract amendment, giving CAP another \$460,000 worth of work, was signed on Sept. 18, 2019 for the construction of a new Birch Grove school. The old school needed to be replaced immediately

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because the foundation was crumbling.

The initial contract was signed by Tolland Superintendent of Schools Walter Willett and Antonietta DiBenedetto, one of the owners of CAP, while the second was signed by then-Town Manager Michael Rosen and DiBenedetto, records show.

Willett and Rosen did not respond to numerous phone calls to their offices on Friday, but Willett issued a written statement to The Hartford Courant.

In his statement, Willett alleged that local officials in Tolland were pressured by Diamantis to choose CAP and another contractor, D'Amato Construction, for the school construction project.

“Representatives of the town and the board felt they had no real choice as to CAP and D'Amato because Mr. Diamantis routinely emphasized there would be detrimental effects to the project if Tolland chose contractors or consultants other than CAP or D'Amato,” he said, according to the statement provided to The Courant.

Kosta Diamantis' daughter, Anastasia, could not be reached for comment.

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all of this, but they haven’t contacted us, and we don’t know why.”

West Hartford Attorney Craig Raabe of IZARD, KINDALL & RAABE said Friday he is representing CAP and DiBenedetto and that they would not comment.

According to statements included in a recent report compiled by former U.S. Attorney Stanley Twardy Jr., Anastasia Diamantis told investigators that the owner of CAP “called her out of the blue and offered her the job.”

She described CAP as a Rhode Island-based company. But she also acknowledged that she did work on school projects in Connecticut for CAP. Anastasia Diamantis said “she worked on spreadsheets and did filings for CAP,” according to the investigation report.

### **Under investigation**

Anastasia Diamantis' employment at CAP was not the only position she held that was of interest to investigators.

Twardy was hired by Gov. Ned Lamont to conduct an independent review of how Anastasia Diamantis came to get an executive assistant position at Chief State's Attorney Richard Colangelo's office — at the same time Colangelo was lobbying

Kosta Diamantis to help him get pay raises for staff in Colangelo's office.

Kosta Diamantis also was an undersecretary at the Office of Policy and Management, the agency that could approve such pay raises.

On Oct. 28, Diamantis was removed from the OPM position by the governor's office and suspended with pay from the school construction post. Rather than accept the suspension, Diamantis retired. He has since filed a grievance with the state Employee Review Board alleging he was targeted by the administration after he complained that two of Lamont's top aides, Joshua Geballe and Paul Mounds, had been disrespectful to OPM Secretary Melissa McCaw.

Meanwhile, a federal grand jury issued a subpoena to the state Department of Administrative Services on Oct. 20 for all emails, text messages and attachments involving Kosta Diamantis and a broad range of construction projects.

Federal authorities sent an addendum to that subpoena eight days later asking the state to prioritize 19 search terms — among them Anastasia, Antoinetta, DiBenedetto-Roy, Construction Advocacy Professionals and Birch Grove.

## **Emergency contract**

The Birch Grove school project was considered an emergency by state legislators in January 2019 after tests revealed that the foundation of the school was cracking because the concrete used to build the foundation contained pyrrhotite, a mineral that was causing cement to deteriorate in foundations and houses and buildings all over Eastern Connecticut.

The state initially agreed to pay 89% of the costs for the project and waived normal bidding procedures because of the emergency.

The state funded two contracts — the first for about \$9 million to build portable classrooms at the site so students could go to school while the old school was demolished and replaced. The state also agreed to a \$46 million contract to build the new school at the same site on Rhodes Road.

The time frame was tight, as officials wanted the new school open in time for the first day of school in 2021.

The Tolland Board of Education established the Birch Grove Building Committee, which began meeting in May of 2019.

Diamantis appeared at the committee

several times in person and later by Zoom during the pandemic to discuss everything from the design of the new school, to timely submissions of change orders, to questions about budget increases — at one point admonishing the group when a \$2 million add-on occurred because of soil issues, according to minutes of the meeting.

He first appeared at a June 18, 2019 meeting to address questions from the committee about the cost of the portables, the availability of design options and overall costs. Tony D’Amato, the owner of D’Amato Construction, which had just been named the builder, also attended the meeting, according to the minutes.

Two days after that meeting, Construction Advocacy Professionals was hired as construction manager for the Birch Grove project.

The minutes show that Diamantis attended an October meeting to make sure the committee was submitting change orders to the state on a timely basis so they could be reviewed by his 16-member team.

“Mr. Diamantis explained that the purpose of the building committee is to keep the project moving forward and on schedule as well as ensuring it is an amenable design. In regard to the latter, the school will need to be somewhat similar to the original

building. Based on the recognition that additional space is needed, an exception has been made and an agreement is in place that states that the space standard is not involved,” the minutes from the Oct. 1 meeting state.

### **\$2 million soil**

After the old school was demolished, contractors ran into a serious problem almost immediately: The soil could not bear the weight of the new school and needed to be replaced.

The cost would be nearly \$2 million, significantly increasing the total budget, but since the town had approved a \$46 million budget at a referendum, the committee couldn’t exceed that amount without special approval.

Diamantis attended the May 19, 2020 committee meeting to discuss the soil issue and the budget implications, according to the minutes.

Diamantis “addressed the unsuitable soil situation and expressed concern that the town did not have a record of this. He is a bit shocked in regard to the degree of unsuitable soil, \$1M+, that is being removed and cuts need to be made to trim the project to \$46M if the town is not in a position to provide additional funding,” the

minutes state.

Because the town had approved spending no more than \$46 million, committee members started discussing what could be cut from the project to bring the budget back in range.

“Mr. Kosta noted that cuts can be made but they must keep the building healthy and provide an adequate educational experience. He would like to keep the project to \$46M unless the overage is needed,” the minutes state.

The committee’s budget concerns were alleviated a week later when D’Amato made a surprise announcement that the state had agreed to cover the \$2 million cost to dispose of and replace the soil.

The legislature eventually not only approved the extra \$2 million for soil but also agreed to fund the entire project — all \$57 million.

The project stayed within its \$46 million budget, and the school opened on time for the 2021 school year, even as contractors finished small items throughout the building into October. ■