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Landmark Pennsylvania anti-blight law began here

Decades later, housing groups wage battle with city over handling of properties

By Michael Korsh
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For Donald Walko Jr., the landmark law that he championed to fight the ravages of blight across the state began in one of Pittsburgh's legendary restaurants.

During lunch at Mitchell's, the century-old bar and eatery, Mr. Walko — then an unopposed Democratic candidate for the state House — met with a housing court judge in 1994 and talked about the devastating impact of empty, dete-

riorating homes on neighborhoods across the city.

As the former president of the Perry Hilltop Citizens Council, Mr. Walko had heard complaints from people about residents abandoning their homes, but the meeting with then-judge Irene McLaughlin Clark would impact his public life for years to follow.

"I looked upon it as solving that kind of problem," Mr. Walko recalled.

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Former Judge Donald Walko Jr., who as a state legislator was instrumental in passing the conservatorship law.

Biden makes surprise visit to Ukraine

The Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — President Joe Biden made an unannounced visit to Ukraine on Monday to meet with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a gesture of solidarity that comes days before the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of the country.

Speaking alongside Mr. Zelenskyy at Mariinsky Palace, Mr. Biden recalled the fears nearly a year ago that Russia's invasion forces might quickly take the Ukrainian capital. "One year later, Kyiv stands," Mr. Biden said, jamming his finger for emphasis on his podium decorated with the U.S. and Ukrainian flags. "And Ukraine stands. Democracy stands. The Americans stand with you, and the world stands with you."

The Ukraine visit comes at a crucial moment in the war as Mr. Biden looks to keep allies unified in their support for Ukraine as the war is expected to intensify with both sides preparing for spring offensives. Mr. Zelenskyy is pressing allies to speed up delivery of pledged weapon systems and is calling on the West to deliver fighter jets to Ukraine — something that Mr. Biden to date has declined to do.

In Kyiv, Mr. Biden announced an additional half-billion dollars in U.S. assistance — on top of the more than \$50 billion already provided — including shells for howitzers, anti-tank missiles, air surveillance radars and other aid but no new advanced weaponry.

Mr. Zelenskyy said he and Mr. Biden spoke about "long range weapons and the weapons that may still be supplied to Ukraine even though it wasn't supplied before." But he did not detail any new commitments.

Mr. Biden also got a short firsthand taste of the terror that

SEE **UKRAINE**, PAGE A-6

Area groups unite in support of earthquake victims

'There's someone in need'

By Michael Korsh
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Wiam Younes has connected with dozens of Syrian families across Western Pennsylvania in her role as executive director of a nonprofit that helps refugees acclimate to life in the U.S.

With war disrupting life for so many in Syria, many of the families who have come to the Pittsburgh area also have relatives who found refuge in Turkiye in their search for peace and safety, said the executive director of An-sar of Pittsburgh, based in Carnegie.

But two weeks ago, what was once a refuge became the site of unspeakable devastation.

With tens of thousands of lives lost in a series of earthquakes earlier this month, 20 local organizations — spearheaded by Pittsburgh's Turkish Cultural Center — led an interfaith vigil in Bethel Park on Sunday evening to grieve and seek healing.

The gathering brought together representatives of many different religious organizations with the goal, organizers said, of emphasizing unity. About 100 people attended the event to focus attention and prayer on the

SEE **VIGIL**, PAGE A-2



John Colombo/For the Post-Gazette

Inci Gutakar, 49, right, prays with her sons Mustafa, 15, and Murat, 9, all of Beechview. They came to the vigil Sunday at Christ Church in Bethel Park to pray for family in Turkey and mourn lives lost.

Malls, old stores and the state's mini-casinos seem to go together

A WINNING COMBO

By Mark Belko
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In Pennsylvania these days, some old department stores don't fade away. They just trade their sports-wear for slot machines.

At Westmoreland Mall, for instance, a former Bon-Ton store is now home to Live! Casino Pittsburgh, an 80,000-square-foot gambling venue featuring 750 slot machines and 40 table games that opened in late 2020.

But it's not the only old department store to wager on gambling as a form of reincarnation. In fact, four of the five Category 4 mini-casinos licensed in Pennsylvania operate out of former big box stores.

The latest is the new \$35 million Centre County casino to be managed by Bally's. It will be located in a



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Live! Casino is attached to Westmoreland Mall in Hempfield Township, in a former Macy's location.

94,000-square-foot former Macy's store in the Nittany Mall in College Township. The state gaming control board awarded the license for the venue last month.

SEE **CASINOS**, PAGE A-2

Fond remembrances offered after Carter enters hospice

By Jeff Martin
and Maysoon Khan
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Dozens of well-wishers made the pilgrimage Sunday to The Carter Center in Atlanta, as prayers and memories of former President Jimmy Carter's legacy were offered up at his small Baptist church in Plains, Ga., a day after he entered hospice care.

Among those paying homage was his niece, who noted the 39th president's years of service in an emotional address at Maranatha

Baptist Church, where Mr. Carter taught Sunday school for decades.

"I just want to read one of Uncle Jimmy's quotes," Kim Fuller said during the Sunday school morning service, adding: "Oh, this is going to be really hard."

She referenced this quote from Mr. Carter: "I have one life and one chance to make it count for something. I'm free to choose that something. ... My faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I can, whenever I can, for as long as I can."

SEE **CARTER**, PAGE A-4



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Cloudy, midday showers.
Daytime high, 50;
tonight's low, 40.
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Local

Pittsburgh led the way in landmark Pennsylvania blight battle

LAW, FROM A-1

Fourteen years later, Mr. Walko led the legislation in Pennsylvania that would allow neighborhood advocates to take control of dangerous and dilapidated homes and lots from the owners and help salvage them for future generations.

Now, that same law is at the center of an unprecedented legal battle that pits community groups against the city of Pittsburgh over the control of properties that the groups say the city has poorly managed for decades.

The community groups say the Abandoned and Blighted Property Conservatorship Act gives them the weapon they need to take over homes and lots the city has held onto for years acquiring many of them for unpaid taxes — and try to find people willing to rebuild them.

In the absence of any comprehensive plan — such as a land bank with a proven track record — to save the properties, the community groups have turned to conservatorship to target at least 75 city-owned homes and lots.

During a Feb. 9 hearing in the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, Judge John McVay Jr. heard arguments from the city and lawyers for the groups about whether a stay should be issued while a higher court decides whether the government can be targeted.

Pittsburgh’s lawyers have argued the city properties are protected under the state’s Second-Class City Treasurer’s Sale and Collection Act, a unique law that allows the city to conduct its own auctions for properties with unpaid taxes.

But Mr. Walko, who later became an Allegheny County Common Pleas judge, is firm: The owner of a property, whether an absentee landlord or neglectful government, is not protected from the law — at least how



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette photos

The city of Pittsburgh has stated that housing is one of its policy priorities, and Mayor Ed Gainey has said that problematic landlords are a key issue. But a Post-Gazette investigation has found that the city of Pittsburgh is one of those landlords, with almost 5,000 properties left to rot, like this duplex on Idlewild Street in Homewood.



This is the front porch at 915 Elkton St. in Elliott, warning visitors to stay out.

he envisioned it.

“The city’s the owner, and these are blighted and abandoned properties,” he told the Post-Gazette. “I know it’s a burden on the taxpayers, but just imagine the burden

if you live next to one of those rat holes.”

In January, Judge McVay agreed siding with the community groups and allowing conservatorship petitions against the city of Pittsburgh

to move forward, prompting the city to now ask for the stay so that it can appeal.

“The Treasurer’s Sale Act and the Conservatorship Act can be read together to the benefit of all parties and especially the taxpayer and creatively address the myriad of housing issues that the [city] faces,” Judge McVay wrote in his January ruling.

The 2021 legal action against the city came seven years after the city launched a land bank that was created with the power to clear titles of properties, strip away liens and delinquent taxes, and ultimately get the homes and vacant lots back on the tax rolls more efficiently.

But the new entity failed to mount an aggressive sales plan and never raised the kind of money needed to meet its goals before it was eventually placed under the control of the Urban Redevelopment Agency.

When he introduced the law, Mr. Walko said he

hoped it would usher in sweeping reforms — envisioning it as a mechanism to curb individual instances of blight.

One of the lasting images he remembers about the abandonment taking place in the city generations ago was a crumbling property that stood out among the row of neatly-kept homes on Upper Fisk Street in Lawrenceville.

One house made a crucial difference.

“It will provide a way to surgically strike when you have that one problem property on a street or in a block that is bringing down everyone’s property value,” Mr. Walko said on the House floor that June.

The idea of a conservatorship — a court-supervised process to appoint a manager for a blighted property — had been on the books in states like Ohio and New Jersey, which allowed the takeovers to help clean up urban decay that resulted from industrial decline.

But even then, a backlog of city-owned properties — with one in five hit with property and health code violations — was quickly growing, a Post-Gazette investigation found.

By 2008, the city had already acquired more than 750 vacant lots and structures that are part of its real estate portfolio to this day, property assessment records show.

When the law was amended in 2014 — at which point Mr. Walko was presiding over conservatorship cases as a judge — the city had already acquired over half of its current real estate holdings, which are now at about 5,000.

When a city has failed to clean up its properties, conservatorship “provides a new workaroud” to clearing title because it puts the future of these homes to a judge, said Kendall Pelling, executive director of Rising Tide Partners.

To urban experts like Cindy Daley, the director of community redevelopment initiatives at Regional Housing Legal Services, the law provides a way to clear one of the largest legal hurdles to acquiring control of a property: clean title.

More than nine in 10 of city-owned lots and homes have active liens, with the average amount being over \$4,000, a Post-Gazette analysis of county lien records shows.

One city-owned parcel has as many as 70 active liens, while another shows a whopping \$70,000 in city, county, school district and water and sewer authority delinquencies, records show.

“In larger cities, there may be hundreds or even thousands of these properties, and getting to the one in your neighborhood may take a long time — or never happen,” Ms. Daley said. “[Conservatorship is] a wonderful tool that communities can use without having to wait for the city government to take action.”

Mr. Walko, who retired from the bench in 2020, said he’s been stunned by the level of pushback from the city. A spokesperson from the mayor’s office did not respond to repeated requests for comment on the city’s position.

To this day, Mr. Walko maintains that the Conservatorship Act was never meant to completely address the city’s blight problems — but in this case, it may be the only answer to the thousands of properties languishing under the city’s watch.

“I always looked upon the Conservatorship Act as one small tool in a large toolbox, and really looked upon it as addressing that one house on one block,” Mr. Walko said.

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News Obituaries

RICHARD BELZER | Aug. 4, 1944 - Feb. 19, 2023

Stand-up comic and TV detective

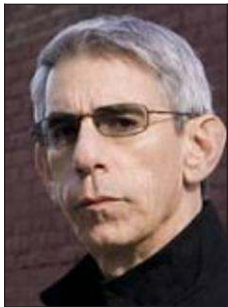
By Meryl Kornfield
The Washington Post

Actor Richard Belzer, who parlayed his stand-up comedy chops into a career playing the iconic role of police detective John Munch in NBC’s “Homicide: Life on the Street” and “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit,” died Sunday. He was 78.

Mr. Belzer was at his winter home in Beaulieu-sur-Mer, France, with his third wife, former actress Harlee McBride, and stepchildren when he died, his longtime friend William Scheft told The Washington Post. Mr. Scheft, who was making a documentary about Mr. Belzer’s career, said Mr. Belzer had circulatory and respiratory health issues for the last few years of his life.

News of his death, first reported by the Hollywood Reporter, has led to an outpouring of tributes from friends and colleagues in television and comedy who remember Mr. Belzer for his beloved role as Munch, as well as a storied career as a stand-up comic.

Comedian Billy Crystal called him “a genius at handling a crowd.” Actor Marlee Matlin described him as “one of the most kindest and welcoming actors”



Richard Belzer

when she was a guest on SVU. Actor Henry Winkler, Mr. Belzer’s cousin, wrote “Rest in peace Richard.” Several shared his most famous moments, including the time he was knocked out by wrestler Hulk Hogan.

Mr. Scheft said Mr. Belzer drew less notoriety for his comedic roles than he did as a detective, but his stand-up had inspired other comedians for decades.

“He is known throughout the world as this character, Munch, who was the longest-running character in television when he retired,” Mr. Scheft said. “And yet, he is not known before that as one of the most influential stand-up comics in the late ’70s. He was legendary.”

Dick Wolf, the creator of “Law & Order,” said in a tribute post on Instagram that he had first worked

with Mr. Belzer on a crossover episode of “Law & Order” and “Homicide” and loved the character of Munch so much that he wanted to make him part of SVU.

“The rest is history,” Mr. Wolf wrote.

“Richard brought humor and joy into all our lives, was the consummate professional, and we will all miss him very much,” Mr. Wolf said.

Mr. Belzer, born in Bridgeport, Conn., struggled with what he called a “bitter childhood.” His abusive mother died when he was 20, and his father killed himself four years later. He took on odd jobs, including a stint as a writer for The Bridgeport Post newspaper.

In 1971, Mr. Belzer decided to try out for a part in an underground theater production advertised in the Village Voice. That role launched his career. He took on other jobs as a stand-up comic, including on “Saturday Night Live” when it was launched in 1975.

In the 1980s, Mr. Belzer hosted a late-night cable talk show, “Hot Properties.” In one of the most notorious moments of the show, Mr. Hogan placed Mr. Belzer in a chokehold as part of an on-air bit that went too far. Mr.

Hogan knocked Mr. Belzer unconscious before tossing his limp body on the ground. Mr. Belzer was hospitalized, needed nine stitches and later sued the wrestling superstar. He used the settlement to buy his homes in France, Mr. Scheft said.

In 1993, the Baltimore-based cop show “Homicide” aired, making Munch a household name.

For the next 20 years, Munch appeared in at least 10 TV shows across five channels, typically donning tinted wire-frames and a cynical attitude. He was known for his interest in conspiracy theories — a trait shared by Mr. Belzer, who had written several books on subjects including UFOs and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

“Homicide cops are fascinating to me,” he said in 1994. “Because of the nature of the victim and the perpetrator, they really find out a lot. These cops could sit and talk to you about horses’ hooves or ashes or furniture, all kinds of things. It’s that Sherlock Holmesian point of using your intellect and not having to resort to your gun. A lot of guys have probably never drawn their gun, and they are very prideful of that. These guys are the chess players.”

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CLASSIFIED OBITUARIES

WILLIAM A. COULTER



William A. Coulter, 94, of Monroeville, formerly of Saltsburg, PA, passed away on Friday, February 17, 2023. He was preceded in death by his parents, Arthur B. and Martha Mae (Kinter) Coulter; his wife, Mona J. (Meixner) Coulter; brother, Ronald Coulter; and sister, Emma Jean Bennett. He is survived by his children, Debra J. Mundro, Lynn R. Coulter, Kelly D. Meyer, and Kris O’Riley-Plourde; three grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Bill was a retired draftsman with Continental Design and Management Co. and a WWII U.S. Navy veteran. He was a member of the Monroeville American Legion Post # 820, Saltsburg Williamson Masonic Lodge # 431, and the St. Martin Episcopal Church. A Memorial Service will be held at 11 a.m. on Wednesday, February 22, 2023, at the GENE H. CORL FUNERAL CHAPEL INC. and CREMATION SERVICES OF MONROEVILLE, 4335 Northern Pike. Condolences may be made at www.corlfuneralchapel.com. Send condolences post-gazette.com/vgb

DENISE M. GURA



Age 70, of Chicago, Illinois, formerly of Elliott, on Friday, February 17, 2023. Beloved companion of the late Albert Kras; loving sister of Robert, Janice, Richard (the late Rose) and the late Kathleen Gura; daughter of the late Harold and Florence (Killmeyer) Gura; sister-in-law of Cheryl Kras and Susan Gura; survived by her loving nieces and nephews, Paula (Rich), Sarah (John), Molly (William), Matthew (Jaclyn), Nicole (Chase), Jim (Becca), Tyler, Lleyton, Maycee, Jaxxon, Kaeden, and J.J. Friends received 2-4 p.m. and 6-8 p.m., Wednesday, February 22, 2023 at ANTHONY G. STAAB FUNERAL HOME, INC., 900 Chartiers Avenue, Pgh., PA 15220, where a Blessing Service will be held on Thursday, February 23, 2023 at 10 a.m. Burial to follow in St. Martin Cemetery. To leave a memory of Denise, please visit our website: www.staabfuneral.com Send condolences post-gazette.com/vgb

LATEST DEATHS

The Post-Gazette’s comprehensive report of recent deaths includes three types of obituaries. News Obituaries, prepared by our staff, are published at the discretion of our editors; call 412-263-1601 to suggest a news obituary. Classified obituaries are paid death notices prepared by funeral home

directors; call 412-263-1371. Funeral home directors may also call 412-263-1601 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. to note a death for which there is no classified obituary. Those names will be listed under other deaths.

CLASSIFIED OBITUARIES COULTER, William A., Monroeville, formerly Saltsburg

GURA, Denise M., Chicago, formerly Elliott HARTMAN, Jane, Penn Hills HOFFMAN, Emily Johanna, Point Breeze JUBIC, Yolanda “Dolly” B., West Mifflin KOVAL, Michael Joseph, Plum, formerly Scott MIGNOGNA, Theresa L. Naylor,

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