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SAVINGS  
INSIDE

CPR saves lives  
Damar Hamlin is high-profile proof  
of “bystander” CPR success.  
Health & Wellness, H-1

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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette photos  
“It’s a nightmare,” said Gabriel Gray, a longtime resident of Homewood, where the city owns more than 800 properties, many of them in various stages of disrepair. “There’s so many nuisance properties that it’s driving everybody in Homewood off the edge of the cliff.”

**POST-GAZETTE INVESTIGATION:** One in five city-owned houses and lots found with violations that include hazardous conditions

## LEFT TO ROT

By Michael Korsh  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The aging, red-brick row home on Edwards Way is like so many other dangerous and decrepit properties on the South Side Slopes. It’s abandoned and empty with boarded-up windows, tangled electrical wires on the outside and has been slapped with an alarming number of county health code violations in the past decade: 90. In most cases, the owner would have been hauled into court or faced hefty fines for failing to repair the critical problems that have left the house unfit for human habitation. But in this case — like hundreds of other examples — there’s little recourse to hold anyone accountable. That’s because it’s owned by the city of Pittsburgh. In neighborhood after neighborhood, the broken-down structures and vacant, weedy lots scattered across the landscape

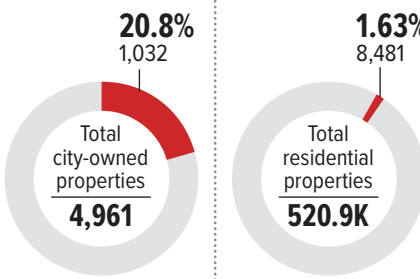


Mayor Ed Gainey has said that absentee landlords should be held accountable for failing to keep up their properties. But a Post-Gazette investigation has found that the city is among the worst property owners — with hundreds of decrepit houses like this structure, where vines engulf the sides of its peeling porch roof in Homewood.

tell the story of Pittsburgh’s real estate portfolio. In Allentown, there’s the row house with a detached roof that leans precariously to the left and the front yard littered with crushed beer cans and fast-food wrappers. In Elliott, there’s the condemned house on Elkton Street tacked with a bright orange demolition sign and the words “STAY OUT” spray-painted across the front. Larimer resident Loretta Ellis said she has lived long enough in her neighborhood to know which homes are owned and managed by the city — and those that aren’t. “When I entertain, my friends have to look at all this blight behind us, because we can’t get the city to do their jobs,” said Ms. Ellis, 65, who moved into the area more than 25 years ago.

### Pittsburgh’s troubled real estate portfolio

As of 2020, nearly 21% of city-owned residential parcels received property code violations. That’s 12 times the rate of 1.63% given for all residential parcels in the city.



Source: Allegheny County property assessments  
Research: Michael Korsh  
Graphic: Ed Yozwick/Post-Gazette

SEE **HOUSING**, PAGE A-6

## Chinese balloon downed by missile

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military on Saturday shot down a suspected Chinese spy balloon off the Carolina coast on orders from President Joe Biden after it traversed sensitive military sites across North America, the latest flashpoint in tensions between Washington and Beijing. Mr. Biden wanted the balloon downed on Wednesday but was advised that the best time for the operation would be when it was over water, U.S. officials said. Military officials determined that bringing it down over land from an altitude of 60,000 feet would pose an undue risk to people on the ground. The presence of the balloon in the skies above the U.S. last week dealt a severe blow to already strained U.S.-Chinese relations that have been in a downward spiral for years. It prompted Secretary of State Antony Blinken to abruptly cancel a high-stakes

SEE **CHINA**, PAGE A-4

## LOOKING AHEAD TO ELECTION 2023 Primaries will test the strength of progressives

By Adam Smeltz  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When they first started knocking off establishment-friendly incumbents, progressives such as Summer Lee, Sara Innamorato and Bethany Hallam signaled a shift for Pittsburgh-area Democrats: The activist challenge to the party’s status quo had arrived. Several years later, with Ms. Lee now in Congress, competitive primary elections this spring will test the power of the region’s progressive movement. While longtime Democratic figures tout their deep government experience, generational differences in voters’ priorities — and in how they organize — are transforming how this year’s nominating contests will be fought and won, political observers say. The progressive-vs.-establishment clashes will be most prominent in a competitive, open race for Allegheny County executive, and will also be seen in elections for County Council and district attorney. State Sen. Jay Costa, D-Forest Hills, expects a handful of specific issues such as health care, housing, transportation and

SEE **PRIMARY**, PAGE A-4

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Weather  
Daytime high 49, tonight’s low 32.  
Page A-18

Almanac ..... A-2  
Books ..... D-5  
Bridge ..... G-8  
Business ..... E-1  
Crosswords ..... G-8

Editorials ..... D-2  
Goodness ..... F-1  
Health ..... H-1  
Horoscope ..... G-5  
Insight ..... D-1

Jobs ..... E-4  
Lottery ..... A-12  
Mortgages ..... G-6  
Obituaries ..... C-4  
Real Estate ..... G-4

Sports ..... B-1  
State & Region ..... C-1  
Sunday Magazine ..... G-1  
Television ..... G-3  
Traffic Watch ..... C-2



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International

# Russia pushes to take town near vital supply line

By Marc Santora  
The New York Times

KYIV, Ukraine — Moscow is deploying thousands of soldiers to southeastern Ukraine as it renews an assault on a strategically important town that Ukrainian forces have used to harass shipments on a critical Russian supply line that runs from the eastern Donbas region to Crimea.

The town, Vuhledar, has long been in Russia’s cross hairs. It sits at the intersection of the eastern front in the Donetsk region and the southern front in the Zaporizhzhia region, close to the only rail line linking Crimea with the Donbas region. The Ukrainians have used that proximity to lob artillery shells at the trains, limiting Russia’s ability to move men and equipment between the two fronts and, ultimately, to achieve its stated aim of capturing the Donbas, which comprises the provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk.

After a major drive in November failed, with reportedly enormous losses, Russian commanders are once again attacking in and around Vuhledar in hopes of securing the rail line.

“This can be done in only one way — by capturing and occupying Vuhledar, which just ‘hangs’ over this railway line,” said Ivan Yakovina, a prominent Ukrainian journalist and radio host. By capturing the

“seemingly small and not very significant town,” he said, “Russia would have received a wide logistical artery along the entire front line and, accordingly, the ability to quickly and massively transfer troops from one direction to another.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy acknowledged in his nightly address Saturday that the situation was “very difficult,” as Russia “throws more and more of its forces to break our defenses.”

In addition to taking control of Donbas, Moscow is intent on keeping control over the so-called land bridge, the slice of occupied territory that connects Russia to Crimea, the peninsula that Moscow has occupied since 2014. Kyiv’s hold on Vuhledar threatens that as well.

Ukrainian officials said that they had repelled the latest assaults, but warned that Russian forces, bolstered by thousands of newly mobilized soldiers, were trying to encircle the town.

“The Russians are not trying to break through the defenses of Vuhledar, but are trying to surround the city from two sides,” the city’s deputy mayor, Maksym Verbovsky, told the Ukrainian news outlet Suspline on Friday. “They managed to advance to some nearby villages, but the Ukrainian military pushed them back to their

previous positions.”

The fighting has left yet another Ukrainian city in ruins.

Vuhledar “was destroyed,” Mr. Verbovsky said. “One hundred percent of the buildings were damaged. The entire infrastructure.”

Fewer than 500 civilians and three children remain, he said, in what had until a year ago been an industrial town of about 15,000.

Vuhledar takes its name, “gift of coal” in Ukrainian, from the mine on its outskirts. Consisting of a cluster of high-rise apartment complexes on an otherwise empty plain, the town’s elevation, exposure and tall buildings give defenders a distinct advantage.

The ill-fated November campaign was led by the Russian Pacific Fleet’s 155th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade, with reportedly disastrous results. Mediazona, an independent Russian outlet that tracks Russians killed in battle, published an interview with a Russian marine who said that more than 200 soldiers had been killed in just three days. Reports of the defeat gained enough traction that the Kremlin felt compelled to issue a statement denying them.

Despite the ongoing fighting, Russia and Ukraine said on Saturday that they had carried out another large-scale exchange of prisoners of war.



Daniel Cole/Associated Press

A vendor sits at a flea market Saturday in Kyiv, Ukraine.

# U.S. presses partners to weed out illicit trade with Russia

By Ben Hubbard  
The New York Times

ISTANBUL — The United States is stepping up efforts to persuade partner nations that have not joined Western sanctions on Russia to crack down on commercial activities in their countries that could be helping Moscow’s war effort in Ukraine, U.S. officials said.

Those efforts include pointing out to foreign governments transactions that the United States suspects are helping Russia evade sanctions and threatening new American sanctions on people and companies that the United States believes are fueling Russia’s war machine, the officials said Friday.

The new push comes as the anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine approaches and as U.S. officials, recognizing the limited effect of layers of Western sanctions on Russia, seek new ways to increasingly damage the Russian economy and undermine President Vladimir Putin’s ability to support his forces.

The sting from these sanctions is leading Russia to look for new economic pathways, said a senior U.S. official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to publicly discuss the efforts.

Despite broad consensus in the United States and Europe about the need to punish Russia economically for its invasion, other large nations — including China, India and Saudi Arabia — have refused to apply sanctions, in many cases greatly benefiting their economies.

The new U.S. efforts have focused on Turkey, a NATO ally, and the United Arab Emirates, a close political and security partner of the United States. Both countries have resisted Western pressure to impose sanctions on Russia, instead continuing to trade with it and providing havens for wealthy Russians and their capital.

This past week, Brian Nelson, the U.S.



Sergey Ponomarev/The New York Times

People visit TerraCity, a mall that is popular with Russian shoppers, in Antalya, Turkey, on Dec. 20.

Treasury Department’s top sanctions official, pressed the United States’ case with officials in both countries, pointing out transactions that the United States suspected could help Russia evade sanctions and raising the possibility of new measures against the people and companies involved.

The senior U.S. official said the United States had indicated specific ways it had seen some companies interact with those under sanction.

These activities have included deals with penalized Russian companies, trade with Russia in U.S.-made products and the export to Russia of so-called dual-use goods, such as plastics, rubber and electronics that can be used for civilian and military purposes, the senior official said.

The Treasury Department said this past week that sanctions on companies involved in such activities could block them from doing business in some of the world’s wealthiest countries, possibly undermining their profits.



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

915 Elkton St. is among the nearly 100 city-owned properties and barren lots in Elliott. Building inspectors cited the structure for overgrown weeds, debris and a dilapidated front retaining wall, among other deficiencies.

# One in five homes owned by city are found with code violations

## HOUSING, FROM A-1

A review of thousands of property records shows the city is the largest property owner in Pittsburgh — about 5,000 empty homes and lots — in some cases taking up nearly entire blocks.

And records also show that it may be the most troubled. One in every five properties has been slapped with health or code violations, including more than 300 that have been condemned.

For years, city leaders have called for the revitalization of Pittsburgh’s oldest and most blighted neighborhoods, including the creation of a rental registry that mandates inspections of properties and serves as a tool to hold shoddy landlords accountable.

But advocates on the front lines of the city’s housing crisis say the city needs to start with itself — and the rampant patterns of neglect that have defined its stewardship over the past decade.

“The biggest slum landlord in the city of Pittsburgh is the city of Pittsburgh,” said the Rev. Sam Ware, executive director of Building United of Southwestern PA (BUSP), a faith-based nonprofit focusing on affordable housing.

## Unsafe conditions

A review of thousands of city records shows its properties are 12 times more likely to incur code violations — including electrical hazards, rodent infestations and properties piled with trash — than the overall rate of homes and lots in Pittsburgh.

Allegheny County inspectors singled out dozens of properties for health deficiencies after they turned up rodent and cockroach infestations, as well as buildings covered in mold.

Not all of the violations were imposed during Pittsburgh’s ownership, records show, but in hundreds of cases, the infractions were not addressed by the city nor were the additional deficiencies repaired under its watch.

Take the case of the aging house on Edwards Way on the South Side Slopes that was slapped with liens for unpaid taxes and health violations for mold, mildew and water leaking into the foundation before the city acquired it in 2017.

Under the city’s ownership, the house continued to deteriorate until finally it was condemned in 2021.

At least a half-dozen residents interviewed by the Post-Gazette said their efforts to contact the city about complaints are often fruitless, even in the case of emergencies.

“It’s a nightmare,” said Gabriel Gray, a longtime resident of Homewood, where more than 800 properties are owned by the city. “There’s so many nuisance properties that it’s driving everybody in Homewood off the edge of the cliff. We’re ready to take the bridge.”

## ‘Stay out’

A review of the county’s records shows the vast majority of the lots and houses



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Police tape is tied to a pole outside of a condemned building in Homewood, where the city owns hundreds of aging homes and vacant lots. Many have been slapped with code and health violations over the years.

were taken over by Pittsburgh in the past 15 years — thousands over unpaid taxes and liens in what were efforts by the city to get the parcels back on the tax rolls.

familiar plan adopted by other Rust Belt cities that have confronted some of the same problems of urban blight and a lack of affordable housing.

Those cities tapped into stimulus funds in the past two years as a chance to green-light much-needed demolitions, and to help turn around distressed neighborhoods.

Two months ago, the city of Toledo, Ohio, announced it would use \$3.3 million in federal dollars to match a nearly \$10 million grant to tear down about 1,000 properties, in partnership with the Lucas County Land Bank.

In Flint, Mich., the county land bank combined \$16 million in stimulus money and other grants to unveil a \$43.5 million initiative to knock down 2,000 blighted structures.

Pittsburgh’s city council, on the other hand, directed just \$2 million toward demolitions — and data from the City Controller’s office shows the city has spent just \$1.6 million of that money, leaving hundreds of thousands of dollars untouched.

So far, of the thousands of structures owned by the city, just 67 have been torn down in the last three years.

While some cities tout major revitalization plans, it’s not clear whether Pittsburgh has followed suit with its own comprehensive strategy, detailed year by year, on how it will resolve its backlog.

More than 2,000 homes and lots have been owned by the city for more than a decade, with hundreds dating back a half century.

The city launched a land bank in 2014 — once proposed as a powerful tool to fix up homes and get them back on the market — but it failed to acquire a single home in the first seven years of its operation, while it spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on consultants and other costs.

“The city has been less than stellar — and in some cases less than adequate — in taking properties and getting them back on the tax rolls and back into the hands of people who want to use them. Whether it’s vacant lots or vacant properties,” Rev. Ware said.

Mayor Ed Gainey, who ran for office in 2021 on a platform of revitalizing the city’s blighted neighborhoods, has been advocating for more affordable housing through a future bond issue that could raise tens of millions of dollars.

But there’s no indication that any such developments would be placed on any of the city properties.

A spokesperson for Mr. Gainey did not respond to repeated requests to interview the mayor. Mr. Gainey has pledged not to speak with the Post-Gazette during an ongoing strike by some employees.

Many of the worst structures owned by the city have become public safety hazards and magnets for crime in some of Pittsburgh’s most devastated areas.

## Voice of anger

For years, Ms. Gray, of Homewood, said she sounded the alarm about a row of empty, boarded-up homes on Kedron Street that had become a gathering spot for young people.

In August, she found that at least one of the properties — where a group of teenagers had been breaking in — was still receiving water, gas and electricity.

When she tried to track down the owner, she examined the county’s property records and quickly found the owner was the city of Pittsburgh.

“What a surprise: an abandoned, raggedy property owned by the city,” Ms. Gray, 39, said. “That means my [utility rates are] going up because the city of Pittsburgh doesn’t want to do their part and have stuff cut off at their properties.”

After years of ignored requests to attend to the homes, Ms. Gray took to Facebook to voice her anger — tagging Mr. Gainey, Councilman Ricky Burgess, whose district includes the neighborhood, and the community adviser to the mayor, Melvin Hubbard El, with images of the homes.

“The city of Pittsburgh does not maintain their properties in Homewood,” Ms. Gray wrote. “How long must Homewood residents suffer from the violence created by the city of Pittsburgh’s gross negligence and lack of transparency and accountability?”

Ms. Gray said her impassioned plea to local officials eventually led to action: The





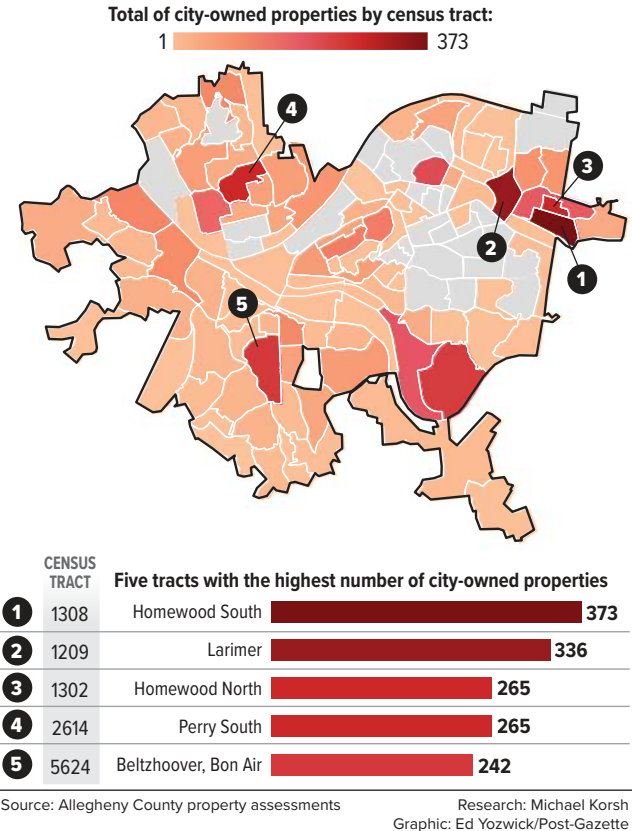
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Acquired by the city of Pittsburgh almost a decade ago, this condemned structure in Homewood is one of more than 70 city-owned parcels on Idlewild Street alone. A Post-Gazette investigation found that the city owns a backlog of run-down, dangerous properties that are located in many neighborhoods.

# City has emerging wasteland of unsafe, abandoned homes

## City-owned properties contribute to blight

As of 2020, more than 20% of the almost 5,000 properties owned by the city were found to have property code and/or health violations by city inspectors.



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

This empty lot on Kedron Street in Homewood once held an unsafe building, which the city eventually demolished. Fallen barricades and traffic cones still lay in the dirt.

## HOUSING, FROM A-6

city demolished the unit in December.

In the process of razing the property, she said, another abandoned structure collapsed into the row of homes where she lives. Her whole house shook — and then the electricity went out.

When Ms. Gray went outside to examine what happened, she found live wires everywhere.

“They’re leaving us for dead — literally,” she said.

With more than 800 city-owned parcels across the neighborhood, Homewood has emerged as the epicenter of the city’s troubled real estate portfolio.

But in other areas across Pittsburgh — from Crafton Heights to East Hills — inspectors turned up code violations on more than 2,000 properties in the five years starting in 2015.

And those are just the violations that can be found in public records. For the past two years, the Department of Permits, Licensing and Inspections has not updated its public database of citations due to technical issues — and so far, there’s no indication when the data will be available, said director Sarah Kinter.

At 7308 Idlewild St. in Homewood North, a collapsed roof has left a massive heap of scrap metal and decomposing wood at the home’s entrance.

Deeming it unsafe, in-

spectors noted in March 2019 that “this structure is condemned and must be made safe immediately.”

To this day, the house still stands with the same dangerous conditions.

When violations are found, private owners are put on alert about the infractions and fined in some cases. If they continue to ignore the problems, they can be taken to court. But when it comes to the city, there’s little recourse.

“The city usually can’t, under law, force the city to do stuff, because they’re in some ways exempt from the exact laws that we as residents have to comply with,” said Ernie Hogan, executive director of the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group.

The dangers in the city properties don’t just appear on inspection reports; they also threaten public safety as lures for criminal activity.

Rev. Ware’s faith-based organization, BUSP, is part of the Homewood Community Development Collaborative, a group of nine non-profits working to bring change to the neighborhood.

A few years ago, Rev. Ware said he and a group of residents — along with the captain of Pittsburgh Police Zone 5 — met at Shiloh Community Baptist Church to take a tour of Homewood.

As the group walked through the neighborhood,

it identified dozens of lots with overgrown weeds and broken-down buildings. Upon further examination, he said law enforcement found drug dealers were hiding guns and drugs in the lots — and using the vacant buildings for illicit activity.

“When people see a community with abandoned buildings or buildings with broken windows and high weeds, then criminals know that’s a community they can do things in — because no one’s paying attention,” Rev. Ware said.

### Daunting tasks ahead

Ms. Kinter of the city’s Department of Permits, Licensing and Inspections said in the most egregious cases — like the house near Ms. Gray’s on Kedron Street — the city can authorize the property to be razed.

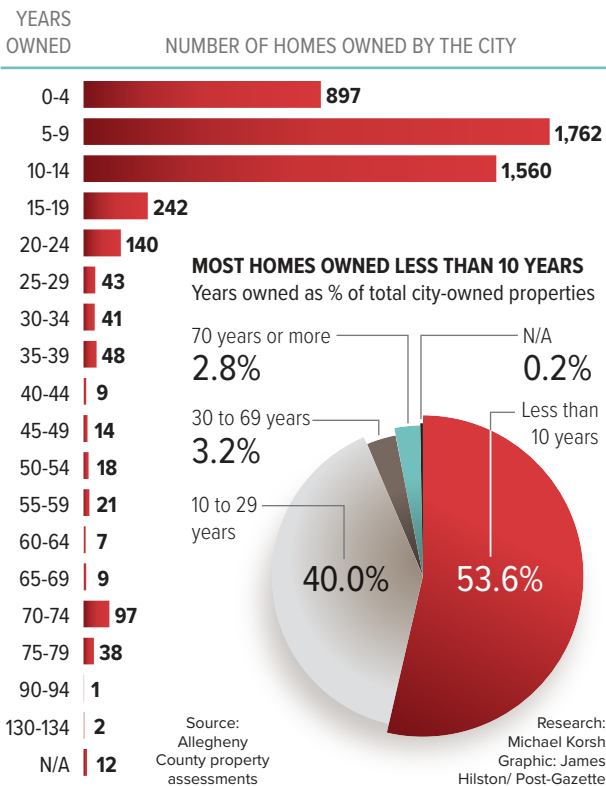
According to the city, in order to consider a demolition, a condemned building must present “imminent danger” — defined as partly collapsing or having impending structural failures — or amount to a public safety hazard.

Records show that at least 333 city-owned structures in Pittsburgh have been condemned.

The cost of demolition can be expensive: Over the past three years, the average tear-down project has cost taxpayers over \$45,000, according to city records.

## City properties by the years

Many local governments acquire vacant properties — some carrying liens and unpaid taxes — to eventually get them back on the tax rolls. In Pittsburgh, there’s a backlog of thousands, some acquired by the city decades ago.



The city has completed just over 200 demolitions since 2019, and most of the properties were not owned by Pittsburgh.

Advocates say while past mayors have taken an aggressive approach toward demolition, a robust land

bank and a strategy that targets the hardest-hit areas and sets goals for each one annually is needed.

“We think that instead of spending the money on demolition, wouldn’t it be better to put the money up-front to stabilize and hold

the property, and then land-bank it until we can figure out a bigger strategy to move some of these things back to production?” said Mr. Hogan of the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group.

But that also requires a blueprint — one that the city is committed to year after year, he said.

“The city’s got a lot of power. It can make these things a priority. It could fast-track permitting; it could waive municipal charges and fees in order to encourage certain types of development,” Mr. Hogan said.

He and others say it will also require an enormous amount of tax dollars to tackle the sheer number of properties. Just the cost of razing the homes that are condemned would reach \$15 million, based on the average cost per job.

Without a defined plan that’s followed, the task of unloading most of the city’s properties — or tearing them down — remains daunting, said Rev. Ware.

“Our project is, we’re going to do 60 units in Homewood. But there’s probably 2,000 vacant parcels in Homewood. So it’s not even a drop in the bucket. If you do 20 here and 30 there and 20 over here, and your need is 20,000, that doesn’t scratch the surface,” he said.

*Michael Korsh: mkorsh@post-gazette.com; @michael\_korsh*